




FORUM

# Isaiah Berlin's Liberal Reformation

Alicia Steinmetz 

Department of Politics and International Relations, Florida International University, Miami, USA  
Email: [Asteinme@fiu.edu](mailto:Asteinme@fiu.edu)

(Received 19 October 2022; revised 28 January 2024; accepted 6 April 2024)

*This article clarifies the relationship between Isaiah Berlin's liberalism, pluralism, humanism, and "aestheticism" by analyzing his unique approach to, and stories about, the history of ideas. I argue that Berlin should be understood as a reformer of liberalism, who understood his intervention in intellectual-historical terms. Reacting against what he saw as threats to human liberty and dignity rooted in the monist rational–scientific aspirations and expectations of Enlightenment-influenced political ideologies, Berlin responded by reinterpreting liberalism's commitment to negative liberty through an aesthetic conception of the human being and a pluralist way of thinking about politics. In addition to reconstructing how Berlin's writings on the history of ideas enact this liberal reformation, and clarifying the ways in which his resulting liberalism is and is not aesthetic, I also evaluate the potential implications of Berlin's work for thinking about liberal politics in the present.*

In March 1944, Isaiah Berlin, then first secretary of the British embassy in Washington, took a transatlantic flight back to London on a bomber plane. It was not a comfortable trip. Because bombers were unpressurized, Berlin had to wear an oxygen mask for the entirety of the flight and he was not allowed to sleep lest he accidentally suffocate. The plane had no light by which he might read. "One was therefore reduced to a most terrible thing," he later recalled, "to having to think—and I had to think for about seven or eight hours in this bomber."<sup>1</sup> What Berlin thought about during this trip was that he did not want to return to Oxford after his wartime service doing the same work he had been doing when he left it: he did not want to do analytic philosophy anymore. Instead, he decided to become a historian of ideas.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Letters 1928–1946*, ed. Henry Hardy (Cambridge, 2004), 489.

<sup>2</sup> Berlin gave multiple accounts of precisely why he turned to the history of ideas, many of which cite a conversation he had with Harvard logician H. M. Sheffer. Sheffer had argued that progress in pure philosophy is impossible, and Berlin, apparently agreeing, felt that he lacked the ability to make an original contribution in the field and turned to the history of ideas instead. Yet Alan Ryan argues that Berlin overstated his abandonment of philosophy. What he was really doing was turning away from "the logical positivist ideal of philosophical analysis" that aimed at producing "a definition that would hold true forever," and turning towards a historical approach to philosophizing. Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, 2014), 399. See also Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: A Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford, 2013); and Henry Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin* (London and New York, 2018), Ch. 12.

Over the subsequent decades, he would establish two striking reputations for himself: first, as one of the twentieth century's most influential historians of political ideas, who articulated and popularized a number of basic concepts still used by political theorists today, including negative and positive liberty, the shorthand of hedgehogs and foxes, the notion of the "Counter-Enlightenment," and his controversial distinction between value monism and value pluralism; and second, as one of the central figures associated with the variety of contemporary liberalism now known as liberal pluralism.<sup>3</sup> Yet the first reputation often plays out in tension with the other, such that many celebrate the moral and political insights of his lectures and essays for the same reasons that others argue that they make for problematic political theory. Thus, while it has been widely recognized that Berlin's work in the history of ideas had clear political implications within his Cold War context—defending liberal-democratic culture against "totalitarian" projects (and Soviet-style socialism in particular)—the meaning and value of his contribution to liberal political thought remains contested.

Much of the difficulty is due to how Berlin expressed, in his intellectual biographies of past thinkers and his stories about broad trends in the history of ideas, certain moral and political sensibilities, anxieties about mass psychology, and principles of judgment for which he often did not provide direct philosophical justification.<sup>4</sup> Stanley Rosen, attempting to capture Berlin's style, suggests that his essays often communicate his own commitments almost in the manner of a novelist, such that Berlin does not openly state his values but rather leads his readers to infer them "from the views and destinies of his *dramatis personae*."<sup>5</sup> And while it seems that pluralism, humanism, and a commitment to individual (negative) liberty are all important components of Berlin's liberalism, it is often not clear to readers why exactly these components should go together or why they should be chosen at all.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Berlin's writings seem frequently to deny that these ideas necessarily entail each other: there can be pluralism without liberalism (as Berlin held in his readings of figures like Machiavelli and Vico), liberalism without pluralism (as Berlin sometimes said of Mill), and humanism without either liberalism or pluralism (as Berlin claimed of Kant). Indeed, the figure who perhaps came closest to embodying all three—his hero, Alexander Herzen—was a socialist, more of a model

<sup>3</sup>See Eric Mack, "Isaiah Berlin and the Quest for Liberal Pluralism," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 7/3 (1993), 215–30; Mark Lilla, Ronald Dworkin, and Robert B. Silvers, eds., *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York, 2001); William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, 2002); George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (New York, 2002); William A. Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge, 2004); George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge, 2004); Connie Aarsbergen-Ligtvoet, *Isaiah Berlin: A Value Pluralist and Humanist View of Human Nature and the Meaning of Life* (Amsterdam, 2006); William A. Galston, "Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism," *Review of Politics* 71/1 (2009), 85–99; George Crowder, *The Problem of Value Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin and Beyond* (New York and London, 2019).

<sup>4</sup>See Alan Ryan, "Isaiah Berlin: The History of Ideas as Psychodrama," *European Journal of Political Theory* 12/1 (2012), 61–73.

<sup>5</sup>Stanley Rosen, "Review: Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas by Isaiah Berlin," *Journal of Modern History* 53/ 2 (1981), 309–11, at 309–10.

<sup>6</sup>See John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought* (Princeton, 2013).

of humane political agency—what Joshua L. Cherniss calls “a political ethos”<sup>7</sup>—than a source of rational arguments for the superiority of liberal democratic institutions over other political, social, and economic arrangements.

It is true that Berlin had little to say about institutions or political economy—omissions which in themselves might justify skepticism about his contributions to political theory. But for some commentators, the problem with Berlin’s work is not its lack of institutional analysis, but rather that his approach to the history of ideas as moral and political philosophy tends to evaluate political cultures and ideologies according to their aesthetic qualities rather than on the actual political ends that they promote. Of course, one might point out, rightly, that an appreciation for the aesthetic aspects of a work of political theory has always been part of what it means to understand it: what is said is not separable from how it is said. But for George Kateb, Berlin’s aestheticism actually compromises liberal ends by using “the perceived or imagined beauty of an inherently non-aesthetic phenomenon in order to exempt it from moral or epistemological scrutiny.”<sup>8</sup> In Kateb’s analysis, the inherently nonaesthetic phenomenon in question is pluralism, which Kateb thinks should be seen as “the inevitable, if often not very admirable, outcome of personal freedom,” wherein individual liberty is the primary value, and pluralism is an effect. But Berlin, Kateb argues, places pluralism first and individual liberty second by looking on cultures as works of art, thereby deriving “the worth of [personal] freedom from its role in securing pluralism” and compromising his liberalism.<sup>9</sup> There are interpreters who have taken issue with Kateb’s reading and defended Berlin’s work from the charge that it is overly aesthetic.<sup>10</sup> But it is difficult to completely dismiss the sense that Berlin does treat concepts to some degree as aesthetic phenomena, and moreover that he thought this way of looking at thinkers and ideas was an important component of what it means to realize and defend liberalism as he understood it.

In this article, I offer an alternative account of the aestheticism of Berlin’s liberalism, rooted in his approach to, and stories about, the history of ideas. I suggest that Berlin is best understood as an internal reformer of liberalism, and that he understood his intervention in intellectual-historical terms. He viewed the political ideologies of the twentieth century—whether communist, fascist, or liberal—as subject to a common tendency within all governments, facing the need for increased state planning in the years after the Great War, to erase questions and debate over ideas from political life, and instead of attempting to rationally persuade populations, to view and treat them as irrational, natural objects to be manipulated and coerced. His concern was with a set of political aspirations, expectations, and ways of viewing human beings that he saw rooted in the Enlightenment-era belief that all human conflicts and problems could be resolved if only the correct scientific method could be applied to society.

<sup>7</sup>Joshua L. Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2021).

<sup>8</sup>George Kateb, “Can Cultures Be Judged? Two Defenses of Cultural Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin’s Work,” *Social Research* 66/4 (1999), 1009–38, at 1009.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>See in particular Johnathan Riley, “Defending Cultural Pluralism: Within Liberal Limits,” *Political Theory* 30/1 (2002), 68–92.

What Kateb sees as Berlin's aestheticism is a feature of his response to the shared intellectual roots of Enlightenment political ideologies—the outcome of his attempt both to distinguish the meta-political and meta-ethical identity of liberalism from communism and to reform liberalism away from the rational–scientific threats to human liberty and dignity that he saw lingering in its monistic foundations. I argue that while Kateb is right to note that there are aesthetic qualities to Berlin's work, he is wrong in his characterization of what exactly those qualities are, and in his claim that Berlin's pluralism undermines his commitment to individual liberty. Berlin viewed pluralism as part and parcel of what it meant to prevent the sacrifice of individual liberty to the social ends of state planning. Yet even as I argue that Berlin's reformed liberalism avoids the confusion of liberal commitments for which some of his critics fault him, I suggest that it may inadvertently promote different obfuscations in what it encourages and discourages in the analysis of political questions and in the imagination of political possibilities.

### Monism, Enlightenment, and the twentieth century

Since calling a theory “aesthetic” or referring to someone’s “aestheticism” can have a range of senses, it is worth clarifying from the outset what I mean by this term. Kateb, for his part, means two things: “first, the disposition to look or hunt for beauty (and sublimity), in matters present to the senses or the mind; and second, the disposition to regard some inherently non-aesthetic phenomena as more or less aesthetic phenomena, and therefore to justify these non-aesthetic phenomena as we justify manifestly aesthetic phenomena—namely, by their imputed beauty (or sublimity).”<sup>11</sup> In both uses here, aestheticism refers to a *mode of valuation*. However, aestheticism could instead refer to a *mode of conceptualization or judgment* (as in Arendt's interpretation of Kant's aesthetic judgment). In this usage, aestheticism need not exclusively involve the categories of beauty or sublimity. Kant himself might have thought of aesthetic judgment as the particular kind of judgment that one brings to the consideration of beautiful or sublime things, but Arendt's account of political judgment as being like aesthetic judgment refers to a much wider range of opinions that cannot be validated purely by rational processes. When I refer to Berlin's aestheticism, I mean something closer to Arendt's sense—something which cannot be subsumed under a rule because the qualities of its particular instances are not contained within its general category. For Berlin, the general category is “the human being”; when I say that he has an aesthetic conception of human beings, I do not mean that he values them for their beauty (or sublimity) or even their capacity to create beautiful or sublime things, but rather that for him individual humans and their values cannot be subsumed under a general category in such a way that a single value or predetermined hierarchy of values can be imposed on each in the same way. In the next section, I will return to Berlin's concept of the human being and its aesthetic character in this special sense. But first, I will lay out some important context for understanding what Berlin was thereby rejecting and why he was rejecting it.

<sup>11</sup>Kateb, “Can Cultures Be Judged?”, 1010.

At the end of the First World War, there was a widespread feeling that liberal democracy was in crisis and perhaps had reached the end of its life span. Even among its defenders, there was a growing sense that it was at a turning point, a time which called for better management and planning, for more centralized and rationalized administration, and for societies to be studied and governed using “the same sort of knowledge that had been attained in the natural sciences.”<sup>12</sup> German sociologist Karl Mannheim argued that the old liberal order which had walked hand in hand with laissez-faire capitalism had reached its end; social and economic planning was now an inevitability, and the only question was what mode of planning to pursue. “We are living in an age of transition from laissez-faire to a planned society,” he wrote in 1943, and “the planned society that will come may take one of two shapes: it will be ruled either by a minority in terms of a dictatorship or by a new form of government, which, in spite of its increased power, will still be democratically controlled.”<sup>13</sup> Mannheim coined the phrase “planning for freedom” to describe the latter approach, a combination of increased central coordination and growth in executive power, reshaping the psychological and spiritual condition of democratic populations to forge basic consensus about shared values. The dawn of mass society also brought tectonic epistemological shifts in the study of political and social phenomena, as “the social sciences emerged from under the tutelage of philosophy and of history to gain an independent status,”<sup>14</sup> producing new disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, experimental psychology, psychoanalysis, and the transformation of “political economy” into “economics.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1950, Berlin published an article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” marking one of his first influential public statements as a political thinker as well as a historian of ideas following his return to Oxford after the war. “Historians of ideas,” Berlin writes in the opening sentence, “however scrupulous and minute they may feel it necessary to be, cannot avoid perceiving their material in terms of some kind of pattern.”<sup>16</sup> These patterns, he goes on to explain, contain the methods and categories “of a normal rational outlook of a given period and culture,” and the history of these different patterns is “to a large degree the history of human thought.”<sup>17</sup> The main historical story Berlin goes on to tell in this article is about transformations in the broad moral and political outlook of European societies, which started in the late eighteenth century, became the new orthodoxy in the course of the nineteenth century, and then in the twentieth century broke off into different tendencies at sharp variance from their roots. What the great liberating movements of the nineteenth century had

<sup>12</sup>Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 92. See also Joshua L. Cherniss, “Against ‘Engineers of Human Souls’: Paternalism, ‘Managerialism’ and the Development of Isaiah Berlin’s Liberalism,” *History of Political Thought* 35/3 (2014), 565–88.

<sup>13</sup>Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time: Wartime Essays of a Sociologist* (London, 1943), 1.

<sup>14</sup>Peter Wagner, “The Twentieth Century: The Century of the Social Sciences?,” in Ali Kazancigil and David Makinson, eds., *World Social Science Report 1999* (Paris, 1999), 16–31, at 16.

<sup>15</sup>William Callison, “Political Deficits: The Dawn of Neoliberal Rationality and the Eclipse of Critical Theory” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2019), 8.

<sup>16</sup>Isaiah Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” in Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2013), 55–93, at 55.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 56–7.

in common, Berlin argued, was that “they believed that the problems both of individuals and of societies could be solved if only the forces of intelligence and of virtue could be made to prevail over ignorance and wickedness.”<sup>18</sup> In particular, they had held two convictions together that later came apart.

The first conviction was that “man is, in principle at least, everywhere and in every condition, able, if he wills it, to discover and apply rational solutions to his problems.”<sup>19</sup> The second was the conviction that a self-governing society could be realized through the spread of education, democracy, and public debate over ideas. The two convictions were held together by the belief that humankind had a rational destiny, attainable through the gradual collective enlightenment of autonomous individuals. The new outlook that these movements took on in the twentieth century, however, was quite different. One element of this outlook was “the notion of unconscious and irrational influences which outweigh the forces of reason” and another was “the notion that answers to problems exist not in rational solutions, but in the removal of the problems themselves by means other than thought and argument.”<sup>20</sup> These elements broke off into two paths, one towards technocracy, and the other towards reaction. Communism and fascism were the result.

Berlin wrote relatively little about fascism. In “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” he described it “as the culmination and bankruptcy of the mythical patriotism which animated the national movements” of the nineteenth century, in contrast to which communism had grown out of “humanitarian individualism,” and said little else about the structure of fascist thought.<sup>21</sup> But in “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism,” he portrayed it as one of three reactions to the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, and their apparent failures to resolve human misery and degradation. Whereas liberals, he writes, saw the failures of the French Revolution as due to a lack of moderation and reason, and socialists “laid stress on the culpable lack of attention to (and consequent impotence in the face of) social and economic factors,” the proto-fascist reaction Berlin analyzed in Maistre turned against Enlightenment rationalism and its belief in progress and human perfectibility in favor of “salvation by faith and tradition” and an assertion of the “incurably bad and corrupt nature of man, and consequently the unavoidable need for authority, hierarchy, obedience and subjection.”<sup>22</sup> Fascism, then, was an example of the general outlook Berlin saw as characteristic of the twentieth century, but he did not analyze it as extensively as he did liberalism and communism.

Indeed, Lenin was one of Berlin’s key examples for showing what the outcome of this transformation in twentieth-century outlook looked like in comparison with its roots. Lenin, Berlin suggests, started with familiar Enlightenment beliefs in the ability of human societies to rationally solve their problems by promoting egalitarianism in economic organization and education,

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>22</sup>Isaiah Berlin, “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism,” in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2013), 95–177, at 102, 113.

but his practice was strangely like that of those reactionaries who believed that man was everywhere wild, bad, stupid and unruly, and must be held in check and provided with objects of uncritical worship. This must be done by a clear-sighted band of organizers ... men who grasped the true nature of social development, and in the light of their discovery saw the liberal theory of human progress as something unreal, thin, pathetic, and absurd.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere, Berlin clarified that he saw the origins of Soviet totalitarianism in how Enlightenment ideas, and Marxism in particular, had appealed to and been transformed by the psychological needs of nineteenth-century Russian elites. He explained in “The Russian Preoccupation with Historicism” that Russia had been forcibly thrust into the Enlightenment tradition through Peter the Great’s attempt to modernize Russia by sending young men to Europe, where a new Russian intellectual elite became deeply concerned with feelings of inferiority, obsessed with finding a historical purpose for themselves, and willing to put into action whatever ideas seemed to promise that purpose.<sup>24</sup> So, Berlin writes, “the notion that history stands there encouraging and deterring, condemning and pushing forwards, [was] already a fixed idea in public Russian thought,” providing the “fertile soil Marxism fell [into] when it finally came to Russia.”<sup>25</sup> When the Bolsheviks took power in a Russia only recently liberated from its decrepit and corrupt tsarist regime, Lenin knew that the conditions did not match up with Marx’s historical theory. But “Lenin was an impatient man, and wished to make a revolution soon rather than late, and therefore had to devise extraordinary stratagems in order to prove that, as a matter of fact ... Russia was already in a condition to make a revolution.”<sup>26</sup> At this point, the dreams of nineteenth-century emancipatory movements, rooted in the idea that scientific methods could be applied against the superstitions of the past for the betterment of society, became the basis a new belief: the necessity, in the name of human progress and welfare, of some political, scientific elite who can manipulate or force the populace into behaving rationally.

Meanwhile, Berlin suggested that there were some liberal societies where the old nineteenth-century union between individual rationality and collective rationality had survived.<sup>27</sup> But they too were under threat from this new outlook. “The main current of the nineteenth century does, of course, survive into the present and especially in America, Scandinavia, and the British Commonwealth,” he writes, “but it is not what is most characteristic of our time.”<sup>28</sup> Instead, what was most characteristic was

<sup>23</sup>Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” 72.

<sup>24</sup>As Aileen Kelly explains, he portrayed figures like Tolstoy, Bakunin, and Belinsky “as continually torn between their suspicion of absolutes and their longing to discover some monolithic truth that would once and for all resolve the problems of moral conduct.” Aileen Kelly, “Introduction: A Complex Vision,” in Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London, 1978), xiii–xxiv, at xxviii.

<sup>25</sup>Isaiah Berlin, “The Russian Preoccupation with Historicism (Sussex 1967),” in the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, at <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/broadcasts/B37a.pdf>, 1–30, at 19–22.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>27</sup>Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” 83.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

a new concept of society, the values of which are analysable not in terms of the desire or moral sense which inspire the view of its ultimate ends ... but from some factual hypotheses or metaphysical dogma about history, or race, or national character, in terms of which the answers to the question of what is good, right, required, desirable, fitting can be “scientifically” deduced.<sup>29</sup>

His suggestion was that the differences between the twentieth-century political ideologies were less important than their similarities. What they had in common was a tendency to transform their Enlightenment, eighteenth-century roots—their belief that all human problems could be solved with the right method—into an attempt to erase moral and political questions entirely, or else to turn them into purely technical questions. Thus he wrote in the closing paragraphs of “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” “whether in the East or West, the danger has not been greater since the ages of faith ... the progress of technological skill makes it rational and indeed imperative to plan, and anxiety for the success of a particular planned society naturally inclines the planners to seek insulation from dangerous, because incalculable, forces which may jeopardize the plan,” adding that this danger was present “whether imposed by conservatives, or New Dealers, or isolationists, or Social Democrats, or indeed imperialists.”<sup>30</sup>

He told a slightly different version of this basic story in his 1953 essay “The Sense of Reality,” but it too emphasized the Enlightenment roots of the scientific outlook that concerned him. The great systematizers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he writes, “evidently supposed that men were to be analyzed as material objects in space and that their lives and thoughts were in principle deducible from the mechanical laws which governed the behavior of their bodies.”<sup>31</sup> In the nineteenth century, this Enlightenment aspiration was transformed by thinkers like Hegel and Marx, who broke from the mechanistic view of the early Enlightenment and claimed that history contains laws of its own, that human societies grow according to these historical laws, and that history inevitably unfolds in a particular direction. However, Berlin suggests that in the nineteenth century, historical materialism, determinism, and other approaches to studying society scientifically involved a politically restrained view of rationality: among Hegelians, Marxists, Comteans, and Darwinians, he writes, “ideas and forms of life ... were considered to be inalienable from, ‘organically’ necessary to, the particular stage of historical evolution reached by mankind,” and therefore even the most scientific thinkers believed that the discoverable laws of human society also strongly limited what history allowed at any given time.<sup>32</sup> But yet again, this changed in the twentieth century. The grand social-engineering projects that actually were enacted violated historical expectations and previously theorized limits. Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler, Berlin suggests, each achieved in their own way something previously considered impossible. They revealed that historical laws were malleable or even breakable and that human

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>31</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “The Sense of Reality,” in Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York, 1999), 1–39, at 8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.



beings could be made into whatever the planner wanted them to be; and thus, Berlin writes, “the banisters upon which the system-builders of the nineteenth century have taught us to lean have proved unequal to the pressure that was put upon them.”<sup>33</sup>

The element common to these two stories was a warning about a generally liberating, humanitarian outlook, characteristic of many different movements in the nineteenth century, despite their differences, which transformed into an anti-human outlook in the twentieth century that tended to produce totalitarianism, technocracy, and a variety of other threats to human liberty and dignity. This outlook, or broad pattern—what Berlin thought allowed these movements to transform in the way they did—was what Berlin would come to refer to as monism: the belief “that to all true questions there must be one true answer and one only, all the other answers being false, for otherwise the questions cannot be genuine questions.”<sup>34</sup> Enlightenment monisms were not the only monisms that Berlin thought existed in Western philosophy—indeed, he claimed that it was, in some form or another, “the central belief on which human thought has rested for two millennia.”<sup>35</sup> But he viewed the Enlightenment as the source of the specifically rational–scientific varieties of monism with which he was often most concerned.<sup>36</sup> He was not, however, anti-Enlightenment. Indeed, he was sympathetic to the propositions that rational debate and consensus-seeking were desirable, that social science could shed light on problems, and that social planning could play a role in improving human welfare. His critique was rather of the attempt “to achieve by hook or by crook a single unitary method” which would establish “one complete and all-embracing pyramid of scientific knowledge, one method; one truth; one scale of rational, scientific values,” and what he saw as the political consequences of this kind of ambition.<sup>37</sup>

For if there was a single harmony of truths, a single answer to all true questions, and a single method that can apply in all cases to produce this answer, Berlin suggested, then it implied “that those who know should command those who do not,” an excuse for “unlimited deposition on the part of an elite which robs the majority of its essential liberties.”<sup>38</sup> In the nineteenth century, science and individual liberty, rationality and democracy, were believed capable of being perfected through a single system of knowledge. The twentieth century, however, opened a great epistemological gulf between them. Now, there was the calculating power of the sciences, still relentlessly progressing with confidence in the rational destiny of humankind, and the faceless, irrational masses, standing in the way of that destiny. And while the main focus of Berlin’s critique was the Soviet Union, he saw this danger in some way as common to all political ideologies of the twentieth century. Berlin’s account therefore also functioned as a

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>34</sup>Isaiah Berlin, “My Intellectual Path,” in Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2013), 1–28, at 6.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>36</sup>For a useful critical guide to Berlin’s conception of the Enlightenment see Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson, eds., *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2016).

<sup>37</sup>Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” in Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2013), 94–165, at 96.

<sup>38</sup>Berlin, “My Intellectual Path,” 16–17.

warning to liberal societies. In part, this warning concerned the psychological appeal of positive liberty and what Berlin saw as the possible comparative unattractiveness of negative liberty, especially in conditions of economic and identity-based insecurity.<sup>39</sup> But it amounted also to a warning about liberalism's own Enlightenment roots, and about the potential vulnerability of a commitment to individual (negative) liberty if this commitment were based solely on monist, rational–scientific foundations.

This internal critique of liberalism's rational–scientific roots is easy to miss because of how Berlin, in “Two Concepts of Liberty,” seemed to map the distinction between positive and negative onto different ideologies, such that Soviet-style communism is associated with the former and Anglo-American liberalism with the latter. Indeed, his basic claim was that Anglo-American liberalism's tendency to think about human freedom in terms of a negative “freedom-from” conception of liberty made it less likely that such societies would become totalitarian in comparison to those varieties of socialism or liberalism which thought in terms of a positive “freedom-to” conception. But his analysis of the system-building impulse common to all Enlightenment traditions, liberal or otherwise, suggested that adopting a negative conception of liberty did not in itself necessarily prevent potential justifications for sacrificing individual liberty if it seemed necessary to do so for the purposes of realizing desirable social goals.

Indeed, Berlin suggested that it was not only socialism, but also eighteenth-century rationalism and nineteenth-century liberal utilitarianism, that had advocated as liberating the idea that man's irrational passions could be redirected toward optimal outcomes if the design of law and institutions were directed by scientific principles. “Helvétius (and Bentham),” he writes, “believed not in resisting, but in using, men's tendency to be slaves to their passions; they wished to dangle rewards and punishments before men ... if by this means the ‘slaves’ might be made happier.”<sup>40</sup> While neither are usually identified as full-blown liberals, both influenced classical liberal thought. Bentham, for instance, believed that individuals were the singular source of utility (and therefore should be free to pursue utility through market interactions) at the same time as he tended to view them as natural objects that could be subjected to scientific methods to produce rational results. It was possible, in other words, to conceptualize liberty in a negative way (as the space of non-interference from political or social oppression), and also at the same time to view humans as irrational, natural objects, who could legitimately be manipulated or coerced into realizing the solutions to the problems that they might prove unable to realize on their own. And in the midst of the pressures and transformations of the twentieth century, Berlin worried that there was the potential for the oppression and sacrifice of individuals and groups, even within movements and regimes ostensibly committed to negative liberty and democratic governance. For he held that when human beings are *represented* as natural objects, as might happen when one tries to govern societies according to methods modeled on the natural sciences, it becomes all too easy to *treat* them as natural objects—that is, to manipulate, deceive, or sacrifice them to achieve desirable ends.

<sup>39</sup>See Ian Shapiro and Alicia Steinmetz, “Negative Liberty and the Cold War,” in Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven Smith, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (Cambridge, 2018), 192–211. This discussion can also be found, with a revised conclusion, in Ian Shapiro, *Uncommon Sense* (New Haven, 2024), 197–233.

<sup>40</sup>Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in Berlin, *Liberty*, 166–217, at 184.

## Pluralism, negative liberty, and the human being

Protecting liberalism from this temptation required rethinking its commitment to individual liberty. For Berlin, this meant not only clarifying the conceptional distinction between a positive and a negative conception of liberty, but also redescribing the foundations of historical liberalism away from its scientific–rational aspirations and expectations. Surprisingly, it was in certain sensibilities of the Counter-Enlightenment that Berlin found the elements for articulating these new foundations, and for explaining why negative liberty should be protected—at least to some minimum degree—and cannot be sacrificed for the sake of even the most appealing goals. I call it surprising because he also analyzed Counter-Enlightenment or Romanticism as a source of the anti-rationalism that he associated with twentieth-century fascism.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, George Crowder suggests that Berlin’s story roughly was that “the Enlightenment is the chief source of totalitarianism in its Communist variant, whereas the Counter-Enlightenment and romanticism are the chief sources of fascism.”<sup>42</sup> But Berlin also found in the Counter-Enlightenment an approach to thinking about history, and how to look at human thought and action within history, in a way that pushed against rational–scientific monism, and the temptation to view humans as natural objects that he believed this monism promoted.

Giambattista Vico’s distinction between natural-scientific explanation and historical explanation offered the basis of the alternative meta-ethical and meta-political outlook that Berlin thought liberalism needed. Because humans can give an account of their intentions in acting, Vico had argued, they can inherently understand history in a way that they cannot understand the natural world. For Vico, Berlin explained, it would therefore be “a perverse kind of self-denial to apply the rules and laws of physics or of the other natural sciences to the world of mind and will and feeling; for by doing this we would be gratuitously debarring ourselves from much that we could know.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, if someone asked, “Why did you cut down that tree?” and I responded “because the laws of nature dictate this action,” then even if I could somehow explain how this was so, I would be avoiding the question, refusing to attempt to understand what it might be possible to understand. I would be engaging, Berlin suggested, in a kind of reverse anthropomorphism, infusing the animate world with the qualities of the inanimate world—a denial of my own experience of what it means to be human.

Historical analysis was therefore less like scientific analysis and more like “moral and aesthetic analysis,” Berlin argued, because it presupposes an understanding of human beings as “active beings, pursuing ends, shaping their own and others’ lives,” and not “merely as organisms in space, the regularities of whose behaviour can be described and

---

<sup>41</sup> On Berlin’s conception of the “Counter-Enlightenment” and its relationship to Romanticism see Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler, eds., *Isaiah Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 2003); Robert E. Norton, “The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68/4 (2007), 635–58; Steven Smith, “Isaiah Berlin on the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment,” in Cherniss and Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, 132–48, at 134; and Gina Gustavsson, “Berlin’s Romantics and Their Ambiguous Legacy” in *ibid.*, 149–66.

<sup>42</sup> Crowder, *Liberty and Pluralism*, 50.

<sup>43</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities,” in Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2013), 101–39, at 122.

locked in labour-saving formulae.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time, he clarified, history is not art, for it purports to represent things that actually happened; it has epistemic standards—factual veracity, for instance—which distinguish it from the realm of myth and illusion, and which ask us to make judgments by categories other than those of beauty and sublimity. But what makes historical analysis like aesthetic analysis, Berlin claimed, is the importance it places on “allowing for imponderables in forming historical judgment,” and “common sense, or knowledge of life, or width of experience, or breadth of sympathy or imagination” in the practice of judgment, abilities which have “relatively little value for those who deal with inanimate matter, for physicists or geologists.”<sup>45</sup> The questions asked within historical studies cannot be answered with absolute criteria, but instead require what Vico called *fantasia*, the effort to imaginatively inhabit “the modes of thought and expression and emotion of one particular kind of way of life.”<sup>46</sup> *Fantasia* or *Verstehen* (imaginative understanding), unlike scientific or factual knowledge, is an imaginative, empathetic, perspectival mode of apprehension; it requires inhabiting an “inside” view of human experience.

It was not only in Vico that Berlin found this perspective, but also in his former teacher, R. G. Collingwood. In his 1936 essay “Human Nature and Human History,” Collingwood had argued that the Enlightenment-era attempt to establish a science of human nature on the model of natural science had failed to study the human mind. The human mind had to be studied in movement, which is to say, experientiality and historically, developing over time and space. To illustrate, Collingwood suggested that a bicycle not being ridden is still recognizable as a bicycle. Its structure makes it what it is, separate from its function. But this is not true of a mind. What is a mind that is not thinking? A brain, perhaps, a physical organ, a lump of matter. Mind has no structure separate from its function. Human thought, therefore, cannot be studied by purely scientific methods, but always demands historical ones. “When a scientist asks, ‘why did that piece of litmus paper turn pink?’ He means ‘on what kinds of occasions do pieces of litmus paper turn pink?’ When a historian asks ‘why did Brutus stab Caesar?’ he means ‘what did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?’” argues Collingwood, adding that “the cause of the event, for [the historian] means the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about: and this is not something other than the event, it is the inside of the event itself.”<sup>47</sup> Berlin thought Vico’s and Collingwood’s perspective on what it means to understand people and their ideas *as human* suggested a larger outlook; for him, the purpose was not so much to give an explanation of why X did Y, but instead, as Steven Lukes puts it, “to defend and advocate a certain *way of thinking* about moral and political questions ... 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>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History,” in Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2023), 135–86, at 174.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities,” 131.

<sup>47</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1956), 214–15.

<sup>48</sup> Steven Lukes, “The Singular and the Plural: On the Distinctive Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin,” *Social Research* 61/3 (1994), 687–717, at 698, original emphasis.

The outlook he subsequently referred to as pluralism was his response to rational–scientific monism. Pluralism held that there could be more than one truth, one ultimate value, one method, one rational answer, and that was it was not possible to resolve them all into common harmonic system. Vico had asserted that the study of human history reveals no “absolute criterion of value,” but only “intelligible change.”<sup>49</sup> If this was true, Berlin reasoned, then it followed that different human values could be incommensurable with one another, and thus that when there was conflict between these values, we should not expect that there will always be one single right answer for choosing between them. It was not that Berlin thought that a pluralist outlook always resulted in a negative conception of liberty, or a commitment to ensuring some degree of it, because there were many types of pluralism. For instance, one could take a pluralist perspective on truth, as he claimed the Greek skeptics did, or a pluralist perspective on the ethical codes of different spheres of action, as he claimed Machiavelli did, neither of which led them to a commitment to negative liberty. There could even be types of pluralism—such as some kinds of cultural pluralism—that could lead to moral and political relativism. Indeed, this is how Kateb interprets Berlin’s argument: that Berlin is suggesting that, because humans create different values and cultural value systems, respecting humanity requires appreciating their creations as works of art, resistant to universalizing moral or epistemic judgments that might reduce them to one value or set of values.

But in my reading, Berlin thought his particular understanding of pluralism offered a middle ground between Enlightenment universalism and the Counter-Enlightenment’s emphasis on particularity, localism, and variety. Vico offered the basis of this pluralist outlook, by suggesting that the study of humans, unlike the study of natural objects, could not be done by applying a single absolute criterion of value to particular cases, and instead required taking an inside view of human experience in all its variety. The German Romantics, Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder, helped him to develop this insight further, through their rejection of the idea that “there are universal, timeless, unquestionable truths which hold for all men, everywhere, at all times,” and asserting instead that “different cultures gave different answers to their central questions.”<sup>50</sup> But he did not embrace Hamann’s and Herder’s pluralism uncritically. For instance, Berlin agreed with Hamann that generalization can lead “to the creation of faceless abstractions ... with the consequence that theories propounded in terms of these abstractions do not touch the core of the individuals whom they purport to describe or explain,” and to the potential political attempt to force individuals “into some Procrustean bed of conformity to rules which certainly maim and may destroy them.”<sup>51</sup> But then he goes on to claim that Hamann’s rhetoric went too far. For “to forbid abstraction is to forbid thought, self-consciousness, articulation of any kind,” and Hamann, in reacting too fervently against the Enlightenment, ended up in “blind obscurantism, an attack on critical

<sup>49</sup> Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities,” 128.

<sup>50</sup> Berlin, “My Intellectual Path,” 10.

<sup>51</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “The Magnus of the North,” in Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2013), 301–447, at 435–6.

thought, the making of distinctions, the formulation of hypotheses, ratiocination itself.”<sup>52</sup>

Herder’s pluralism also had some aspects of which Berlin approved and others of which he did not. He seemed to be sympathetic, for example, to Herder’s understanding of *Fortgang* (advance), which sees progress as lying “in a variety of cultures,” each of which “develops in its own way,” even as “there are some qualities that are universal in man” and so “one culture can study, understand and admire another.”<sup>53</sup> But *contra* Kateb, it is not clear to me that Berlin embraced Herder’s view of cultures as organic wholes or saw liberal pluralism as requiring that conviction. Berlin himself, after all, was made up of multiple cultures, each of which he valued and did not consider to be totalizing and singular for the development of the individual in the way Herder did.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, he suggested that the kinds of value conflicts that demonstrate the plausibility of value pluralism can arise not only between cultures but also within cultures and even within individuals in daily experience.<sup>55</sup> What he mainly found attractive in Herder’s conception of cultures as organic wholes was that he thought it promoted a kind of nonpolitical populism or cultural nationalism—“the belief in the value of belonging to a group or culture”—that was distinct from political nationalism.<sup>56</sup> But he certainly did not agree entirely with Herder that “each phenomenon to be investigated presents [exclusively] its own measuring-rod, its own internal constellations of values in the light of which alone ‘the facts’ can be truly understood,” which is closer to relativism than Berlin’s position.<sup>57</sup>

Berlin did not think that values between cultures always differed, conflicted, or proved incommensurable with one another.<sup>58</sup> He referred, for instance, to the existence of a “moral core”—values that all cultures recognize to at least some extent because they are rooted in natural human needs—as well as a “common human horizon”—the larger sphere of values that were not shared but communicable (by imaginatively taking “the inside view” of a culture).<sup>59</sup> He also claimed that there were absolute limits to the plurality of values, truths, rational choices, ways of life—limits to what could be pursued “while maintaining my human semblance, my human character.”<sup>60</sup> In some places, Berlin spoke of these limits in terms of moral incomprehensibility or imaginative resistance.<sup>61</sup> In his “Two Concepts” lecture, he described them as rules “grounded

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>53</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, 208–300, at 268–9.

<sup>54</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, “Epilogue: The Three Strands in My Life,” in Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2014), 433–40.

<sup>55</sup> See Alicia Steinmetz, “Value Pluralism and Tragic Loss,” *Critical Review* 32/4 (2020), 556–73.

<sup>56</sup> Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 218, 225; see also Berlin, “My Intellectual Path,” 11.

<sup>57</sup> Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 293.

<sup>58</sup> See Alex Zakaras, “Isaiah Berlin’s Cosmopolitan Ethics,” *Political Theory* 32/4 (2003), 495–518.

<sup>59</sup> See Jonathan Riley, Isaiah Berlin’s “Minimum of Common Moral Ground,” *Political Theory* 4/1 (2013), 61–89.

<sup>60</sup> Berlin, “My Intellectual Path,” 14.

<sup>61</sup> In an interview with Steven Lukes, for instance, Berlin cites the hypothetical example of a man who sees no difference between pushing pins into a tennis ball and pushing them into human skin (the incomprehensible feature being that for this man causing pain to someone would be a matter of complete indifference).

so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history” that they have become “an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being.”<sup>62</sup> These are the kinds of rules which, regardless of whatever the law permits or commands, cannot be broken without making us feel some degree of revulsion, such as “when children are ordered to denounce their parents, friends to betray one another, soldiers to use methods of barbarism; when men are tortured or murdered, or minorities are massacred because they irritate a majority or a tyrant.”<sup>63</sup> He also claimed that “genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty” was one of these rules.<sup>64</sup> Berlin clearly did not think that limited universalism and cross-cultural judgment were ruled out by his pluralism. The German Romantics offered examples of a pluralist outlook, just as Machiavelli and the Greek skeptics did, but not exactly the one Berlin associated with liberalism.

A closer model for what I take to be Berlin’s own view of the connection between pluralism and liberalism, and why he thought his pluralist outlook offered a better foundation for negative liberty than an Enlightenment monist one, can be seen in his somewhat unstable treatment of J. S. Mill. In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin depicts Mill’s defense of individual liberty as made up of two distinct arguments. The first, aligned with negative liberty, holds that “all coercion is, in so far as it frustrates human desires, bad as such, although it may have to be applied to prevent other, greater evils.”<sup>65</sup> The second, aligned with positive liberty, depicts freedom as a means to rational progress through the belief that all social problems and all genuine moral and political questions can be solved, so long as people are allowed the liberty to continue debating until the truth is found out. In other words, Mill makes a powerful argument for protecting individual liberty even when it seems, in the short run, to be prejudicial to the achievement of desirable social and political goals. But at least part of the grounding for this argument is his sense that such liberty will lead to truth and utility in the long run—a promise of permanent progress, harmony, and the answers to all human problems that, to Berlin, too closely mirrored the expectations of the natural sciences. Thus, in a footnote, he writes of Mill, “this is but another illustration of the natural tendency of all but a very few thinkers to believe that all the things they hold good must be intimately connected, or at least compatible, with one another.”<sup>66</sup> In “Two Concepts,” then, Berlin presents Mill as an example—albeit a clearly liberal example—of how the Enlightenment aspirations of nineteenth-century emancipatory movements could turn into a justification for sacrificing liberty if, for instance, later inheritors of Mill’s thought accepted his view of progress and truth but no longer shared his confidence that individual liberty was the best tool for achieving these ends.

But in a different essay, “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” Berlin claims that Mill’s defense of individual liberty actually does operate on nonscientific grounds.

---

Isaiah Berlin and Steven Lukes, “Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes,” *Salmagundi* 120 (1998), 52–134, at 104–5.

<sup>62</sup>Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 210.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 175 n. 1.

Alex Zakaras argues that this essay is crucial for understanding Berlin's liberalism for several reasons.<sup>67</sup> Not only does this essay represent one of Berlin's most direct attempts to address the philosophical justification of liberalism, but also it seems to endorse Mill's own justification of liberalism as the best one available: *On Liberty*, Berlin writes, "superseded earlier formulations of the case for individualism and toleration, from Milton and Locke to Montesquieu and Voltaire, and despite its outdated psychology and lack of logical cogency, it remains the classic statement of the case for individual liberty."<sup>68</sup> Berlin here asserts that Mill does not defend liberty because it leads to truth or increases utility; he defends it because "he is sure that men cannot develop and flourish and become fully human unless they are left free from interference by other men within a certain minimum area of their lives."<sup>69</sup> In other words, Mill's commitment to protecting individual liberty is independent of, and prior to, his beliefs about scientific progress or the rational destiny of humankind. Liberty is an end in itself because without it people cannot realize an essential component of what Mill thought it means to be human—to live a life of one's own.<sup>70</sup> And "at the centre of Mill's thought and feeling lies, not his Utilitarianism ... but his passionate belief that men are made human by their capacity for choice."<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Berlin argues that Mill's notion of human beings as defined by the choices they make rather than the happiness they seek made him unable to accept any notion a single, final goal of life or of politics, "because he saw that men differed and evolved, not merely as a result of natural causes, but also because of what they themselves did to alter their own characters, at times in unintended ways."<sup>72</sup> Mill was thus a utilitarian in name but a pluralist at heart, one who embodied for Berlin an attractive "attempt to fuse rationalism and romanticism ... a rich, spontaneous, many-sided, fearless, free, and yet rational, self-directed character."<sup>73</sup>

This what I mean by the "aestheticism" of Berlin's reformation of liberalism. It is neither, as Kateb claims, a way of justifying cultures by the categories of beauty or sublimity, nor a total rejection of the possibility of limited universalism and cross-cultural judgment. Instead, it is a variety of humanism which conceptualizes each individual or collective instance of the category "human" as irreducible to a general rule without at the same time asserting that absolutely no features between particulars are shared. To view humans *as human*, Berlin asserted, meant to view them aesthetically—that is, to see them as self-determining beings, capable of making meaningful, self-constituting choices between different values and possible ways of life. Pluralism was Berlin's understanding of the meta-ethical and meta-political implications of viewing humans this

<sup>67</sup>Alex Zakaras, "A Liberal Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin and John Stuart Mill," *Review of Politics* 75/1 (2013), 69–96, at 82.

<sup>68</sup>Isaiah Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in Berlin, *Liberty*, 218–51, at 219.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 235–6.

<sup>70</sup>See David Russell, "Aesthetic Liberalism: John Stuart Mill as Essayist," *Victorian Studies* 56/1 (2013), 7–30. If one accepts Russell's interpretation of Mill, Berlin's reading might be understood as bringing out the true, aesthetic foundation of Mill's liberalism by sidelining the question of method in Mill's work.

<sup>71</sup>Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 237.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 244.



way, as well as the outlook that he thought was necessary for guarding against the twentieth century's historical tendency, in part due to Enlightenment rational–scientific monism, and in part due to the increased needs of state planning, for governments and movements to erase the appearance of conflict and choice, and to treat people as irrational, natural objects, who could legitimately be manipulated and coerced into the realization of whatever ends the state might seek to realize.

The reason why Berlin thought a pluralist outlook supported negative liberty better than a monist one did, however, was not really because it produced a justification for it, or for other liberal values, that monism could not. It was certainly possible, after all, to make arguments for individual rights or limitations on political power on monist grounds, as many Enlightenment-influenced thinkers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had (including the utilitarian version of Mill). What pluralism did, Berlin thought, was primarily to change the expectations and aspirations we have about what is possible in moral and political life. Nineteenth-century liberals viewed all their commitments as harmonious with one another, Berlin had argued in “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” and thus they did not see that “faith in full democracy” was not entirely compatible with “the inviolable rights of minorities or dissident individuals,” or that natural rights were not entirely compatible with “tentative empiricism and utilitarianism.”<sup>74</sup> The implication is that nineteenth-century liberals were not prepared for the possibility that there might be situations in which they had to choose between different values. When twentieth-century liberals were confronted with these situations, they would be tempted to try to hide or erase these choices—to take them out of the sphere of public debate and into the realm of the scientific and technical.

If liberals were to adopt a pluralist outlook, however, then they would be less likely to transform moral and political questions into purely technical ones, and, Berlin thought, more likely to continue to respect people's freedom to search for different answers, to make different choices, and to live in different ways, at least to some minimum degree. This is because they would not expect or aspire to perfection, and instead think about the judgments and choices they must make from certain conceptual bedrocks—that all good things do not necessarily go together, that there is no single goal that history progresses towards, that humans and their values are more like aesthetic phenomena than like scientific ones, and that each individual human has a life of their own to lead.<sup>75</sup> One of Berlin's favorite and oft-repeated phrases, that “from the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made,” drawn from Kant's “Idea for a Universal History,” is an illustrative example.<sup>76</sup> When Kant wrote those words, what he meant was that the greatest possible realization of a just social order might always prove imperfect because of the imperfect rationality with which human beings are constituted.<sup>77</sup> What Berlin means with the phrase is instead “from the crooked timber of humanity,

<sup>74</sup>Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” 65.

<sup>75</sup>For an innovative take, against Berlin's, on how the attempt to harmonize values can actually be understood as an exercise of negative freedom, see Maria Dimova-Cookson, *Rethinking Positive and Negative Liberty* (London and New York, 2020).

<sup>76</sup>On Berlin, Kant, and C. I. Lewis see Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 9.

<sup>77</sup>On Kant's tragic notion of maturity in comparison to Berlin's see Shterna Friedman, “German Idealism and Tragic Maturity,” *Critical Review* 32 (2020), 458–92.

no straight thing *should* ever be made,” because to do so would represent a conceptual contradiction in how we, as pluralists, experience what it means to be human as self-determining, multifaceted, value-creating beings.

## Conclusion

Berlin’s aestheticism, I have argued in this article, was the result of his effort to replace what he saw as the monistic rational–scientific foundations of nineteenth-century liberalism with pluralist aesthetic–humanist ones. And rather than exempt values, cultures, and truths from moral or epistemic judgment, it seems to me that Berlin’s aestheticism was rather an effort to pluralize the possible categories of political judgment and prevent their subsumption into a single system.<sup>78</sup> This kind of aestheticism cautions and limits more than it promotes—that is, it forbids applying a single value or predetermined hierarchy of values onto human beings, and it holds that there are finite limits to the number of values that can be recognized as human, but otherwise does not offer a guide as to how to weigh and rank different values against one another. His resulting liberalism has a similar character. It has a strong attachment to a negative conception of liberty, an aesthetic conception of the human being, and a pluralist outlook on moral and political life, but says little about the political conclusions that follow. In conclusion, then, I will offer some speculations on what might follow.

One thing that I suspect Berlin thought was politically implied by his work was strong legal protections against state interference. Indeed, in his “Two Concepts” lecture, he claimed that legal rights and nonlegal absolute limits standing between human and inhuman action (something like natural rights) were the two central principles of the liberal tradition with which he most identified—that of “Constant, Mill, Tocqueville,” who held “that no power, but only rights, can be regarded as absolute, so that all men, whatever power governs them, have an absolute right to refuse to behave inhumanly.”<sup>79</sup> But Berlin never said precisely what those rights were, instead referring to the question as “a matter of argument, indeed of haggling.”<sup>80</sup> He also said very little about institutions or political economy, and offered no general principles of justice. Berlin was less interested in specifying how liberal societies should structure legal value hierarchies; he was concerned rather to prompt others to recognize that value conflicts occur and that choices between values must be made, choices for which there will not always be one single correct answer. Thus one thing that seems to distinguish Berlin’s liberalism from other varieties of liberalism is that it de-links the concept of negative liberty from any particular rights regime, institutional structure, or economic system.

On the one hand, this gives his liberalism an openness to many different possible judgments and choices, potentially making more issues available to trade-offs and negotiation than other more explicitly political theories of liberalism do, so long as one understands the choices being made in a pluralist way, and some minimum degree of

<sup>78</sup>See Ella Myers, “From Pluralism to Liberalism: Rereading Isaiah Berlin,” *Review of Politics* 72/4 (2010), 599–625.

<sup>79</sup>Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 211.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 171.

negative liberty remains protected (perhaps by rights, but also perhaps in other unspecified ways). Indeed, this kind of openness and indeterminacy was in some ways exactly what Berlin wanted. “In the past there were conflicts of ideas,” he writes, referring to the great liberating movements of the nineteenth century, “whereas what characterizes our time is less the struggle of one set of ideas against another than the mounting wave of hostility to all ideas as such.”<sup>81</sup> He wanted people to take ideas seriously, to live in the frustration of a free culture of debate, and to allow values to clash with, push against, and thereby sharpen and moderate one another. It was perhaps this ability to hold a tension between powerful ideals, and fear of the consequences of resolving these tensions too much in favor of one or the other, that attracted Berlin to some historical liberals over others—Constant’s ancient and modern liberty, Mill’s utilitarianism and humanism, Tocqueville’s aristocracy and democracy.

On the other hand, this openness may come with a drawback, which is that it allows—indeed encourages—reflections on what it means to be a liberal or to defend liberal democracy in terms that are largely meta-ethical and meta-political, severed from analyses of how political institutions and economic structures operate and the consequences they produce. It suggests that one can be a liberal without a theory of power and of how institutions and structures work or fail to work to channel, limit, concentrate, or disperse it. Judith Shklar, to whose liberalism of fear Berlin’s work is often compared, found this omission troublesome, and she suggested that Berlin perhaps placed too much weight on the conceptual distinction between positive and negative liberty, and between monism and pluralism, and too little on the conditions that make negative liberty possible. “If negative freedom is to have any political significance at all,” she wrote, “it must specify at least some of the institutional characteristics of a relatively free regime. Socially that also means a dispersion of power among a plurality of political empowered groups ... as well as the elimination of such forms and degrees of social inequality as expose people to oppressive practices.”<sup>82</sup> A belief in value pluralism did not seem to Shklar to be a necessary foundation for a commitment to negative liberty. But even if it did play some supporting role, she asserted, it was certainly less important than a pluralism of power.

Of course, there is nothing in Berlin’s work that formally forbids thinking about the structures of power, and when pressed with such critiques, he was often more than willing to concede the point that economic inequality could threaten negative liberty as much as overt state oppression could, and that his pluralism was never meant to suggest otherwise. “I should have made even clearer,” Berlin later wrote, reflecting on his “Two Concepts” lecture, “that the evils of unrestricted laissez-faire, and of the social and legal system that permitted and encouraged it, led to brutal violations of ‘negative’ liberty,” and “I should perhaps have stressed (save that I thought this too obvious to need saying) the failure of such systems to provide the minimum conditions in which any degree of significant ‘negative’ liberty can be exercised ... For what are rights without the power to implement them?”<sup>83</sup> But what a theory allows or can admit is often different from what

<sup>81</sup>Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” 85.

<sup>82</sup>Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in Nancy Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1989), 21–38, at 28.

<sup>83</sup>Berlin, “Five Essays on Liberty: Introduction,” in Berlin, *Liberty*, 3–54, at 38.

it encourages or discourages, and it seems to me that Berlin's aestheticism may inadvertently discourage certain kinds of social and political analysis, especially relating to knowledge areas he viewed as scientific, like economics and technology

In Berlin's rereading of Mill's defense of individual liberty, for instance, he does not just deprive Mill of his monism and utilitarianism; he also downgrades Mill's significance as an economic, social, and scientific thinker. From the corpus of Mill's work, Berlin treats *On Liberty* as the most representative and important part of the overall philosophy, relegating the rest of Mill's social and economic thought to the footnotes. He portrays Mill as a kind of pretend utilitarian, keeping up appearances partly to please his father and partly to please his wife. Indeed, he explains the dimensions of Mill's work that might point towards socialism as the product of his wife's influence. "Despite his father's advocacy, despite Harriet Taylor's passionate faith in the ultimate solution of all social evils by some great institutional change (in her case that of socialism)," Berlin writes, Mill "could not rest in the notion of a clearly discernible final goal."<sup>84</sup> The implicit suggestion is that "final goal," "utilitarianism," "monism," "rational–scientific knowledge," and "socialism" all go together, and that Mill's defense of liberty ultimately rejects them all. Negative liberty, in this way, seems to become severed from positive liberty, and from Mill's social, scientific, and economic theory.

A similar tendency can be found in how Berlin describes how he understands the appropriate approach to historical writing against the "scientific history" of Marx and (Hegelian) Marxists. "We cannot be quite sure what to make of such a category as a social 'class,'" Berlin writes, "whose emergence and struggles, victories and defeat, condition the lives of individuals, sometimes against, and most independently of, such individuals' conscious or expressed purposes."<sup>85</sup> Here, Berlin's complaint is not so much that the idea of social (economic) class turns people into natural objects, or their struggles into purely technical calculations, but rather that it turns them into teleological cultures or races, and makes claims about their interests and behaviors that are not empirically testable or falsifiable. Regardless of whether or not one thinks Berlin is accurate in this characterization of Marx or Marxists here, there seems to me a tendency in his focus—on the individual, on the human, on choice and responsibility—to ignore or downplay the claims about power and the structure of social relations that discussions about social or economic "class" are generally meant to convey. Economic analysis is not always technical, empirical analysis, and a claim like "wage labor is forced labor" does not seem to me to need to be any more falsifiable than a claim like "there is more than one ultimate value." They each express different ways of looking at the world, of understanding human suffering, and orienting political action in light of these perspectives.

In a different place, commenting on the nature of historical explanation (not directed against Marxism), Berlin asserts that, in political history, "the categories and concepts in terms of which situations and events and processes are described and explained ... are, to a large extent, imprecise; they have a so-called 'open texture.' They are everyday notions common to mankind at large, related to the permanent interests

<sup>84</sup>Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," 238.

<sup>85</sup>Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," 99.

of men as such.”<sup>86</sup> But then Berlin goes on to claim that in certain specialized types of history, for instance in technological or economic history, “demographic factors arrived at by statistical generalizations are more relevant ... obtained by methods not very different from those of the natural sciences.”<sup>87</sup> If one wanted to know “the essential facts about the economic history of England in the thirteenth century,” he suggests, one could learn what one needed to know by determining “how many bales of wool were sold ... what prices they fetched ... where they travelled, what was done with them, and so on,” and it would not be necessary “to ask about the moral or religious outlook of the merchants, their private lives, their personal attitudes.”<sup>88</sup> What Berlin means, I surmise, is that there are some questions one might ask about history that are “what” questions rather than “why” questions, questions of fact rather than questions of meaning. But one might say the same about politics. Thus it is not clear to me why Berlin treats economic and technological history differently, why they may be—and indeed, seemingly have to be—scientific, but politics may not. Here again, then, Berlin appears to sever the moral and political from the social and economic, the analysis of values from the analysis of power. What must be preserved, for Berlin, is the autonomy of *human* studies (as if economics and technology are about something other than human life). And whatever Berlin’s intentions might have been, a possible implication of his way of categorizing knowledge in relation to “the human” is that it is acceptable to give over economics and technology to the experts and planners—a troubling suggestion in our present, when wealth inequality in the United States has returned to the highest levels since the 1920s, leading economists to say that we are living in a second Gilded Age.<sup>89</sup>

Like Shklar, Berlin thought that the central aim of liberalism is “to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom.”<sup>90</sup> And like Shklar, Berlin saw the fear of oppression as the motivation for realizing and defending these conditions. But they feared different things, and so focused on different conditions. For Shklar, the primary thing to be feared is “the agents of the modern state” and the “unique resources of physical might and persuasion [they have] at their disposal.”<sup>91</sup> Berlin also feared the agents of the state, but less in terms of their power and available means, and more in terms of their expectations and aspirations. He feared utopian movements dreaming of final human emancipation and harmonization, who might be willing to sacrifice anything to realize this dream. He feared fervent antirationalism, the resentment of those who felt out of place in the present world and longed to return to an idealized past, whatever the costs. And he feared the inhuman gaze of technocrats and social planners, those for whom humans were faceless abstractions, to be manipulated and coerced as mere means to the planner’s goals. Perhaps above all he

<sup>86</sup> Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Max Black, Paul Ricoeur, Yirmiahu Yovel, Raymond Polin, Donald Davidson, Nathan Rotenstreich, and Charles Taylor, “Is a Philosophy of History Possible?” in Yirmiahu Yovel, ed., *Philosophy of History and Action* (Dordrecht, 1978), 219–40, at 221.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>89</sup> See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 2017).

<sup>90</sup> Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” 21.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

feared the potential barbarism of a politics based on certainty. But it may be that in his effort to keep politics insulated from a despotism of certainty, Berlin's liberal reformation risks submitting it to another—a despotism borne from the failure to articulate a vision of a future that makes liberal democracy worth defending.

**Acknowledgments.** The author is grateful to Joshua L. Cherniss, Sarah Collins, Terrell Carver, William Callison, Matthew Shafer, Jennie Ikuta, Nathaniel Mull, and an anonymous peer reviewer for their insightful comments and critical feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.