Philosopher, Historian, Liberal
How Isaiah Berlin Made a Difference

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The setting of this talk is somewhat alien to me, while its timing is delightfully apt. I was raised (more or less) in the Jewish tradition, and today is the 10th anniversary, to the day, of my Bar Mitzvah (that is, the ceremonial recognition of adult membership in the Jewish community); and I can think of no finer way, nor any that pleases me more personally, to note this anniversary than celebrating and participating in the spirit of ecumenism, intellectual curiosity, and commitment to making a difference in the world, which this series of talks so admirably embodies.

Isaiah Berlin is famous for his often-quoted (perhaps rather too often) distinction (derived from the pre-Socratic poet Archilochus) between 'hedgehogs,' who know one big thing, and 'foxes,' who know many things. So, too, we may distinguish between different ways of making a difference. Some have a 'hedgehogish' impact: their influence is felt largely through a single, significant accomplishment in one field of human thought or activity. Others have a more diffuse, multiform influence: though they may fail to achieve a single dramatic feat, or bequeath a single masterpiece, they range across many different fields, leaving a lasting impression on all that they touch. Some individuals do both; Berlin may be one. However, I'd here like to stress the 'foxishness' of his achievements – or, perhaps I should say, to provide a more fox-like perspective on them.

Berlin is often cited for his contributions to philosophy, and it's with this that I will start. The first way in which Berlin made a difference as a philosopher was – and this is characteristic of the man – largely social. Many of us, when we imagine the archetypal philosopher, may think of a lonely, isolated figure, brooding in profound silence and solitude. And there is some truth to this picture – it accurately represents, for example, Descartes, or Schopenhauer. But many philosophers – perhaps the vast majority of them – don't function in this way. Rather, they live and thrive, philosophically (if they do so at all) on *talk*. Berlin was a keen, as well as a brilliant, conversationalist, and his first contribution to philosophy was through his role in bringing together the tight-knit – indeed, really rather insular – group of philosophers whose concerns and methods would come to dominate philosophy in the English-speaking world.

This achievement, however did not represent Berlin's deepest preoccupations, nor his true originality. These lay in his turn away from Oxford philosophy, with its

analytical rigor, fixation on linguistic problems, and aspiration to technical mastery. Berlin was fascinated by intellectual psychology– what people believed, how they came to believe it, how their beliefs shaped their characters and actions, and, through those actions, history. He wanted to know something about human life, to learn something about his fellow men. He left the beautifully terraced but enclosed house of philosophy, because he didn't want to spend his life pursuing endless, somewhat ethereal puzzles, 'in wand'ring mazes lost'.

And so Berlin turned to the history of ideas, which he pursued in his own, unique, fashion. He tended to focus on individuals, while also making sweeping claims about overarching themes of Western thought. He was less interested in the logical coherence of a thinker's ideas than in the roots of those ideas in that thinker's engagement either with other thinkers, or with contemporary problems; and he was less interested in these antecedents than in a thinker's central animating vision. His work combined tremendous erudition with broad brush strokes; the interpretations were original, the presentation striking; but the quotations weren't always exact, the evidence wasn't always carefully marshalled or visibly deployed, and while Berlin excelled in doing long-denied justice to obscure thinkers, when he came to treat well-known giants he often faltered. His essays on Herzen and Hamann have withstood the test of time; his treatments of Rousseau and Hegel, while hardly without merit, seem dated.

Nevertheless, Berlin made a significant difference in the world of scholarship. He did so, first, as an exponent of the history of ideas, whose essays and lectures evoked interest and provoked thought in this previously fallow field. Before Berlin there had been at most a handful of British historians of ideas; now there is a glut of them, and many around the world have first come to this area through his enlivening influence. He also re-defined the scope of intellectual history, by drawing attention to formerly little-known thinkers, thus encouraging the enlargement of the practice of intellectual history by moving beyond the study of a small cadre of canonical figures.

Berlin's essays in the history of ideas also make a difference by enlarging our understanding, both of thinkers of other times and worlds, and of our own world and selves. Berlin was concerned, not only with the reconstruction and evocation of other mental worlds, but also with expanding and enriching our self-understanding, tracing the intellectual paths through which we have come to think as we do and, therefore, to be as we are. Finally, he brought to his historical writings a frame of cultural reference and sweeping imagination that were, and remain, rare in the English-speaking world,

combining them with a lucid and humane sense of human reality which in his time was often in low-regard – and short supply – outside of it. His work thus represents a cultural synthesis which has been achieved by only a rare few.

While Berlin helped to import and enlarge the history of ideas, he did much to revitalise the well-established fields of political and moral philosophy. The first important way in which Berlin made a difference to these fields was to link them together. At a time when those who studied politics were excessively concerned with the study of political behaviour, Berlin insisted that politics is about purposes as well as processes, and that human beings are characterised not just by their behaviour, but by the thoughts, the visions and feelings, behind that behaviour. In the 1950s many were asking whether political theory could still exist; Berlin was one of a small number of figures who kept alive and nourished political theory, setting the stage for its resurgence in the 1970s.

This resurgence in many ways pursued a course very different from Berlin's; but there was one way in which it followed his lead. This was to view political philosophy as the application of moral philosophy to public life. Berlin always insisted on the centrality of moral issues and concerns to political life (which is perhaps why he was not greatly engaged with the nitty-gritty of politics, which so seldom have anything to do with morality), and perhaps his most striking achievement was really as a moral philosopher. This was the development of the idea of value pluralism.

I don't want to spend too much time elucidating the content of Berlin's pluralism – a large task which can and has been undertaken by others, and done far better than I can do here. So, very briefly: pluralism is a theory about the nature of human values. It holds that human beings pursue a number of different values, which are defined by who and what we are; and in turn we are defined by the values we pursue, and which we feel bound to and by. We like to believe that these values are compatible – that all good things go together; indeed, that goodness involves the harmonious achievement of all that we value – this is what we mean by perfection. But this cannot be. Our values come into conflict by their very nature. Equality is a real value, as are order, security, amity among human beings – but pursue any of them too consistently to their conclusions, and liberty must be sacrificed, sometimes horribly so. Justice is certainly a value; but uphold only what is fully just all the time and who of us would escape whipping? Mercy, too, is necessary – but it may require a suspension of the strict demands of absolute justice. And so on. Furthermore, Berlin held that no value is paramount; there is no permanent set of

priorities to guide us, no single, ultimate measure or scheme by which to rank values or resolve the conflicts between them.

So what difference does pluralism make? Rather a big one. In the realm of moral philosophy, accepting it means rejecting utilitarianism's belief in the greatest happiness of the greatest number as the governing principle of morality and policy, Kant's belief in a single, rational, consistent morality of duty, Platonism's picture of a harmonious and eternal moral hierarchy, and the belief in the progressive (though not necessarily peaceful) movement of history towards the solution of the great dilemmas of human life that we find in the thought of Hegel and Marx. On the political level, it leads to a rejection of utopianism, and an acceptance of imperfection and the necessity of compromise. It also supports toleration – a far deeper, more serious toleration than that advocated by many other thinkers. For them toleration is either a necessity – people will tend to disagree, and, vexing as this is, its better to leave well enough alone – or a means to another end, conducing to progress through intellectual competition (what people mean when they use the now somewhat shopworn phrase 'the marketplace of ideas'). But, from Berlin's perspective, toleration is a moral rather than a practical necessity, and is justified in itself rather than for what it eventually achieves. Toleration follows from the recognition that, while there is a difference between right and wrong, there is no monopoly on right, no one right or superior way of life or set of beliefs. It is important to have a variety of different, often quite disparate, ways of life and points of view, because only then can the full range of human values be represented and respected, only then can the multifarious potentialities and needs of human nature be developed and satisfied.

Pluralism can also make a difference in the way we live as individuals. It can enlarge our understanding, helping us to better appreciate others. It does not mean adopting a position of moral laziness. On the contrary: to accept pluralism means pursuing a morally rigorous course. It demands that we make an effort to understand others very different from us, and that we recognise our own limitations. It also means accepting imperfection, frustration, sacrifice and loss as ineradicable parts of moral life, indeed as part of what it means to be human.

(Before leaving the subject of pluralism, I'd like to clear up one common misperception about it: that it is basically relativism in fancy dress. This is neither true nor fair. We might argue about the meaning of relativism; but, at the least, let us say that the relativist denies that there are any standards of right or wrong that transcend

particular situations or practices. Everything derives its goodness or badness from the context in which it occurs, because it is awarded value or opprobrium by particular people, or because it conduces to or prevents the achievement of a desirable goal. Relativism in Berlin's account also asserts that understanding and agreement across borders is impossible. Truth is different on the other side of the Alps, and we can never see the world as people see it there.

Berlin's pluralism rejects both of these claims. One of the main points of Berlin's pluralism is that we *can* understand others who pursue courses different from, and incompatible with, our own. There are common human values, because there is a common human nature – a nature that is complicated and varied, but which we do share. Berlin would, I think, have assented to Montaigne's wonderful comparison of human nature to the human face: each face is different from every other face, and yet it is not wholly different – otherwise it would cease to be recognisable as a face. No two human beings are alike – we are all unique – but we can also recognise one another as fellow human beings, sharing some inner experiences as well as outer resemblances.

Berlin's pluralism is also distinct from relativism in that it holds that values are absolute – though absolute in a rather particular sense. He means by this that values are ends in themselves – they are things that human beings pursue, not for the sake of something else, but because the values are inherently good. Liberty may be desirable in leading to prosperity or discovery; but it is ultimately a value because it is simply good to be free. So, too, some things are wrong by their nature, even if they are necessary in a particular situation. The resort to violence may sometimes be necessary to stave off worse evils; but it is always evil. This, again, relates to Berlin's recognition of the tragic nature of conflicts between equally valid goals and demands. If values were not in some way binding on us, if they were not inherently compelling, if they did not make claims by their very nature which can't be ignored or gainsaid, then agonising moral conflict and sacrifice and loss would not occur. But, for Berlin, these experiences were not only real, but, as I've said, central to what it is to be human.)

I should now like to turn to pursuing the political facet of Berlin's work more fully.

Berlin generally avoided direct political involvement (despite close ties to adherents of the New Deal, architects of Cold War liberalism, intimates of President Kennedy's Camelot, and the Israeli peace movement). Indeed, early on in his career he

remarked that he wasn't a very *political* thinker at all.[1] Nevertheless, Berlin in fact *was* a *very* political thinker, if we think of politics as involving the conflict between different conceptions of what human beings are and, therefore, what they should do and how they ought to do it. While he was never cut out for the role of party apologist – much less that of policy maker – his political impact was not negligible.

Berlin made a difference politically by defending liberalism – and, in the process of defending it, redefining it. The formative experiences of Berlin's life – the Russian Revolution, the 1930s, and his visit to the Soviet Union shortly before the Cold War – were occasions on which Berlin saw liberal values gravely challenged and fiercely assaulted. In response he sought to develop and expound a conception of liberalism that would be at once humbler and stronger.

Many liberals in the early 20th century had high hopes for society and a high opinion of human nature; but Berlin reacted strongly against perfectionism, insisting that liberalism draws its strength and justification from its ability to deal with – its appropriateness in dealing with – the necessary imperfection, confusion, messiness, conflict and indeed tragedy of life. Berlin's liberalism was suspicious of overly ambitious schemes for improvement, not out of a complacent belief that the present order is the best of all possible worlds, but out of a respect for human diversity and eccentricity, and an awareness of human limitations. At the same time, Berlin didn't give up on the core liberal dream: that human beings can live in freedom, can think and choose for themselves, without committing collective suicide; and that laws and policies and institutions could be just, and needn't be onerously oppressive or gratuitously venal or intolerably cruel. These goals are modest and moderate when placed beside the dreams of visionaries and the claims of extremists. Yet, as Berlin reminded us, even these seemingly basic goals go well beyond the reality of most of human history, and are all the more worth striving for as a result.

Berlin was sharply aware of this because his liberalism was historical and empiricist. His commitment to a particular sort of liberalism grew out of his reflection on a broad span of history, and especially the political dreams and disasters of the last two centuries. While many political theorists debated abstract conceptions of rights, the meaning of political terms, and the content of a generic human nature, Berlin moved beyond the vacuum of theoretical construction, in favour of a rediscovery and exploration of lived human experience.

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[1] IB, letter to Mendel Berlin, 1930s.

Another the distinctive feature of Berlin's liberalism, which is I think particularly characteristic and significant, is that it is *humanistic*. The 20th century saw not only the massive destruction of human life, but also what Berlin once referred to as the 'degradation of human personality that we have witnessed in our time.'[2] Berlin was, not surprisingly, deeply affected by, and reacted strongly against, the horrors of his day. But he did not confine himself to condemning the obviously evil exploits of Nazism and Communism. His critique went beyond that, with farther reaching implications.

Berlin was concerned with dehumanisation, with the denial of humanity in the name of, and sacrifice of human beings to, ideological idols. Indeed, I would suggest that much of Berlin's work is best read as a sustained attack on the tendency to ignore the humanity of others by those who are besotted with and blinded by abstractions, to which they bring their own consciences and critical faculties, and the feelings and sometimes lives of others, as tributary sacrifices.

Berlin was certainly not alone in attacking either violations of human rights, or the failure of philosophy to do justice to the complexity of human nature. Or, perhaps, one might better say human character, more than human nature. For while Berlin did believe that there was such a thing as a common human nature, he was far less engaged, for most of his life, with delineating its rather broad ligaments, than with understanding and appreciating the unique personalities of individuals. And this was part and parcel of what set Berlin apart: while many other thinkers also argued that human thought must be freed from its imprisonment in mazes of abstractions, they themselves very often sought to recapture real life in abstract and depersonalised ways. Their style of writing – and, even more, their entire mode of thinking – belied their claims to dispel philosophical fantasy and reveal the reality of human experience. The result might be (and has been) described as bad poetry, in which metaphorical and metaphysical entities clash by night. Not so Berlin, for whom concrete human experience and particular human beings always remained paramount. There may be vague definitions of terms or convoluted arguments in Berlin's essays, but there is never an insensitive or unseeing description of character, nor an unconvincing and hollow account of human feeling.

Thus, while many other thinkers were declaring that the self did not really exist, Berlin was looking about him, noting the travails and triumphs of individual selves, all of whom were very much real. Thus, as many political philosophers squabble about the

[2] 'European Unity and its Vicissitudes', in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1992), p. 205.

competing claims of depersonalised individuals and illusory communities; as many philosophers either ignore human beings in favour of logical and linguistic puzzles, or gleefully do their best to make it impossible to discuss or comprehend human experience at all; and as governments and global conglomerates focus on considerations of cost-benefit analysis, and speak the language of managerial control – in short, as individual human beings are again and again misunderstood or neglected or ignored or cramped or oppressed in the name of fictions that are supposedly larger and more important than they, but which are not, which are rarely worth one drop of real human blood or one cry of real human pain – in the face of all this, Berlin continues to speak to us as a vital, penetrating, and all too rare voice.

But this is claiming quite a bit for Berlin – perhaps too much (he would certainly have said so!) And so, taking Berlin's insistence on attending to the particular, the personal, the recognisably human, let us turn our gaze from this lofty, rather melodramatic, prospect, to a more immediate object. Berlin may have made a great difference to the world; he certainly made a great deal of difference in his own world – and his world was centred on this city, Oxford. Berlin inspired generations of students with his oratorical brilliance, personal charisma, and passion for ideas. He did much, by his personal example and behaviour, to make Oxford more open and welcoming to foreigners, and foreigners to feel more at home here. Finally, his work in founding Wolfson must be mentioned, though I cannot do it justice here. But visit Wolfson, witness its friendliness and openness, its lack of pretence and snobbery and cruelty, its commitment to advancing and supporting learning, as well as the magnificence of its surroundings – and you'll see before you how Berlin made a tangible and enduring difference.

Ultimately the difference that Berlin made was due to, and defined by, who he was. As an anonymous evaluator of the application by the Bodleian for funding to catalogue the Berlin archive wrote, '[Berlin] was internationally significant not only for his own achievements as philosopher, intellectual, teacher, writer and public figure, but also because he moved in so many different circles, corresponded with so many of the leading figures of his day, participated in so many momentous political and cultural events, was a beloved friend and mentor to so many others …'[3] I think that covers most of it, and captures it nicely. (So much so, indeed, that it occurs to me that this talk has

[3] Unnamed evaluator of the application by the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for funding to catalogue the Berlin Papers.

been largely unnecessary …) Berlin's motto, taken from Alexander Herzen, was that the purpose of life is life itself; and he was true to this motto. Berlin's greatest achievement was his life, was the way he lived. He made a difference by being himself; and, though it is too early to know or evaluate what difference he will make in the long run, it could well be that his greatest legacy – the most significant and the most positive – will stem from the force of his personality, the presence of which, thanks to his writings and his deep, enhancing, inspiring, and often formative or transformative impact on many people of various walks of life, continues to be felt, and will be so, I trust, for some time to come.