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## GELLNER ON GRAY ON BERLIN

A review by Ernest Gellner of John Gray's book *Isaiah Berlin* (London, 1995: HarperCollins) was published just before Gellner's death under the heading 'Sauce for the Liberal Goose' in *Prospect*, November 1995, 56–61. The published review was a heavily cut and revised version of a much longer text,<sup>1</sup> finalised at the beginning of August 1995. A carbon copy is preserved in the Gellner papers at the LSE. This longer text, corrected and lightly edited, is published here for the first time, with the permission of Gellner's estate. Footnotes are editorial.

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<sup>1</sup> Also mined for a review in the *Guardian*, 'The Prophet Isaiah', 7 February 1995, 14–15 (reprinted as 'The Savile Row Postmodernist' in the *Guardian Weekly*, 19 February 1995).

## GELLNER ON GRAY ON BERLIN

*THE FOX knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.* Isaiah Berlin has preached the virtues of the fox so long, so persistently and so coherently that he has become the veritable hedgehog of foxiness. He has a single dominating idea – namely, that we should not have single dominating ideas. If Tolstoy was a fox trying to be a hedgehog, then Berlin would seem to be a hedgehog striving to be a fox. Still, in his own writings, the tendency towards rotund digression does in some measure at least camouflage the single-minded preoccupation with the virtues of the fox. Not so in this exposition of his views by an admirer: it is the attractive, passionate, deeply involved pursuit of what is virtually a single theme, namely, the somewhat uneasy relation with liberalism of the idea of a plurality of incommensurate values. Is an irreducible plurality of rival values a good foundation for liberalism, or is it a danger for it, or are the two destined for a turbulent but inseparable cohabitation?

Gray is evidently in love with his subject matter, and in this work, which is almost an intellectual biography, it is frequently hard to distinguish the subject from the object of the interpretation. Gray enters into Berlin's system of ideas, identifies with it, and lives out its tensions. He seems taken over by these ideas: they speak through him. The book is none the worse for that. Being so deeply involved in the problems which haunt Berlin's thought, Gray pursues them with a determination and a passion which are, I think, less conspicuous in Berlin's own leisurely, relaxed, one might say blasé style and mood. Gray–Berlin is troubled, where the prose of the original Berlin displays a decorum and urbanity which effectively hide any turbulence which might be there under the surface, in the logical strain which may exist between the various themes.

Gray alludes to Berlin's triple heritage – Jewish, Russian, English. My own impression is that the three Berlins barely if at all speak to each other, and that they might find each other shocking and less than *comme il faut*.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish one, not surprisingly, is imbued with a sense of tragedy; the Russian one laudably and becomingly stands for moderation and doubt, in a culture which

<sup>2</sup> 'As he should be', 'proper'.

can well do with a bit more of these traits (Turgenev not Dostoevsky); the English one is somewhat too inclined to a complacency which marked and marred the philosophy of the immediate post-war period, with which Berlin was closely connected.

So the Berlin who emerges from Gray's intellectual portrait is rather more coherent and hedgehoggy, and much more perturbed by the problems of his own position, and far more persistent in seeking an answer to them, than perhaps is the case in the original. Gray's idea is that 'all of Berlin's work is animated by a single idea of enormous subversive force'. In effect, Gray acclaims Berlin as the source of a wholly new and superior kind of liberalism, trumping conventional liberalisms with their anticipation of ultimate harmony. Berlin, on Gray's view, achieves this thanks to his own tragic sense of the unresolvable confrontation of values. It is only fair to stress that this very large claim is made by Gray on behalf of his subject, without, to the best of my knowledge, any endorsement by its beneficiary.

It is important to place Berlin in the context of the thought of his time. Gray tries to dissociate him from the linguistic philosophers of the time, such as J. L. Austin, but here I think he oversimplifies. Gray himself quotes a lengthy passage from Berlin in which he denounces and indeed 'exposes' what he calls 'a false theory of meaning' which postulates an ultimately homogeneous universe reflected in an ultimately homogeneous language. The unmasking of this alleged error, generally credited to Wittgenstein and enthusiastically applied by Oxford post-war philosophy, and the alleged role of this supposed error in engendering inherently unnecessary philosophical puzzlement, was *the* central idea of the 'linguistic' movement. The laying bare of the manner in which the pursuit of linguistic homogeneity misleads us, the elimination of the projection of the shadow of a standardised and unreal language on to the world was, for this movement, the very essence of its own, sound, philosophy. *Ordinary* language did not make this mistake, and it is for this reason that attention to it constituted the new, correct procedure of thought: the outcome was a confirmation of 'common sense'. Why was this worth doing? Because this activity removed the temptation of indulging in counter-commonsensical, metaphysical revelations. If indeed this were philosophy, there would simply be no room for political

thought. There is room only for the elimination of illusions engendered by the misguided pursuit of conceptual homogeneity. Projection of homogeneity is the error, its elimination the genuine revelation.

Evidently, then, this vision of language and its relation to philosophy is one of the sources or perhaps lateral supports of Berlin's pluralism, which at the very least overlaps harmoniously with the linguistic mood of the time, if indeed it is not inspired by it. The very formulation, in the passage quoted by Gray, is virtually identical with the then customary formulations of that philosophy. Wittgenstein had taught that language could only be understood by a fox, and that the mistake of all past philosophers was that they were all linguistic hedgehogs. Though this mistake was one about language, once present it spread everywhere like some computer virus and infected everything, whilst its elimination put everything right, leaving 'everything as it was' (as Wittgenstein put it), and incidentally signified the euthanasia of philosophy, for it had been born of this one error. This was an early version of the 'end of history' theme: the end of philosophy, i.e. all questions settled, was made a corollary, not that time of the victory of consumerist liberalism, but of the unmasking of the hedgehog's fallacy about human language and thought. If all philosophical questions are by-products of a mistaken theory of language, then the elimination of that error leaves no further room for questioning. The obverse of this negative theory of past philosophy is that all truth is easily accessible, already in our grasp, 'nothing is hidden', we had all been hammering at a door which was wide open. The passage quoted by Gray could easily have come out of any of the countless manifestos of the movement of that time, and is in total conformity with it. The important overlap lies in the damning of the pursuit of homogeneity as the one crucial error. If there is a difference, it lies in the fact that the 'linguistic philosophers' thought the source of error was a mistake about language, whereas Berlin normally (though not in the passage quoted, which is pure linguistic philosophy) invokes an error, not concerning language, but concerning the human condition, the irreconcilable relationship of our diverse values to each other: there is *no* way of harmonising them in a single, uniquely valid, universally binding ideal. Attempts in this direction are not only doomed to intellectual failure, but are also likely to engender political tyranny.

One of the problems faced what might be called the Pluralism of Language Movement during the days of its post-war dominance was what to do with political thought, how to explain its very existence, the implausibility of the claim that there weren't really any problems, only the illusion of their existence, engendered by a mistaken theory of language. Should not political thought, like the rest of philosophy, be seen as a temptation that must be overcome, once we are in possession of the correct, foxy conception of language? If the only legitimate philosophy is the dispelling of the illusion of one-kind-of-meaning-only, and no substantive philosophy, with real content, can possibly exist (this was the received view and was advertised as the great and final 'Revolution in Philosophy' – *and* its termination), then this should also apply to political philosophy, and there cannot really be any such thing. In all consistency, this should indeed follow. Still, it was all a bit hard to swallow. Had people really fought on barricades, committed tyrannicide, plotted revolutions, theorised passionately about constitutions, denounced past *ancien régimes* simply because they failed to understand the nature of language and its multiple, plural, roles? Could the English, American, French and Russian Revolutions all have all been avoided if only Wittgenstein had lived and written a bit sooner, say in the early seventeenth century, and had explained to people that there was nothing to get hot under the collar about once you understood that language had many incommensurate forms. Would the revolutionaries have abandoned the barricades and quietly dispersed if only they had been told that there are many diverse kinds of language-game and that each type of discourse has its own logic and may not be judged by the standards of another one? Should rioting mobs be read, not the Riot Act, but suitable passages from Wittgenstein? Even the Reformation itself might have been avoided, if only the reformers had understood that the meanings of affirmation lay in their *use*, so that if the practice of the Church diverges from Scriptural doctrine, this is quite in order and merely shows that their real meaning (actual social 'use') was quite other than what you might suppose if you treated them in abstract isolation. If only the multi-functional theory of language had replaced the unique-reference theory earlier, could the West have been spared all its ideological turbulence? It had all been inspired by the notion of extra-social

meaning, an illusion finally eliminated now that we knew what language was really like.

All this is a bit hard to swallow, though it does unquestionably follow from the initial intuition which the thinkers of the period found irresistible. If they did swallow it, this was due in part to the fact that they did not think about history at all, and these preposterous implications were simply not present to their minds. Still, odd though such a view is, some actually took this path, and one, Peter Laslett,<sup>3</sup> actually affirmed it, and received some publicity for his announcement of the death of political philosophy. It was hard to see why it had ever lived.

The news of its death turned out to be much exaggerated. A more plausible position was articulated by Peter Winch, who argued for an uncompromising conceptual relativism: concepts and values were tied to cultures, 'forms of life', which conferred on them all the validity they required, and no other validation was possible or needed. Unsoftened by evasion, this was also too strong to be palatable. In such sharp outline, the falsity of the position becomes too conspicuous: modern history is not relativistic, it unambiguously awards the palm to one cognitive style. Winch's exposition of Wittgenstein is basically correct, but, unintentionally, constitutes its *reductio ad absurdum*.

It was Berlin who found a much more acceptable way out of this little difficulty. Political theorising was rendered *salonfähig*<sup>4</sup> after all. Political philosophy was not to be exactly dead, but not too embarrassingly alive either. It ceased to be unassimilable to the then philosophical paradigm. Political theory would be the study of the history of ideas, and the ideas under investigation would not be doomed a priori to insulation and a merely local validity, each in its own cultural cocoon (as Winch had in effect argued, cogently enough given the premisses): it would just so happen that in practice political philosophy would never interfere in anything. It might ask you to cool it, so to speak. If the central fact of the human condition is the plurality of incommensurate values (it certainly is a fact), then either theorists of the past can be excoriated for the mistake built right into their basic strategy, namely the pursuit of a unique all-embracing truth, a mistake

<sup>3</sup> The typescript reads 'Weldon' (i.e. T. D. Weldon), which appears to be a mistake.

<sup>4</sup> 'Acceptable in polite society'.

which immediately invalidates all their further reasoning (and perhaps they can also be blamed for totalitarianism into the bargain), or, alternatively, they too affirmed this central idea, and so, though intellectually sound, were *ipso facto*<sup>5</sup> deprived of the possibility of excessive interference. Either way, everything will 'remain as it was', which is what the fashionable philosophy of the time required.

Berlin did actually identify predecessors of this perception (though some, it seems, were ambivalent or less than lucid in articulating it): Machiavelli, Vico, Herder, Tolstoy, all of whom came out looking suspiciously alike – Niccolò Berlioz, Giambattista Berlioz, Johann Gottfried Berliner and Lev Nicolaevich Berlinov all seem to be saying much the same and be endowed with a very suspicious likeness. Wittgenstein's discovery of foxy heterogeneity was about language, and Berlin's about values: so the spirit was similar, the field of application different. But the result made political philosophy compatible with the dominant fashion, without implying doctrines about either the death of political theory or the universal validity of all cultures, which, if spelt out too brutally, were barely acceptable. The mainstream of thinkers at the time applied it in the theory of knowledge (for instance, Sir Stuart Hampshire described epistemology as a condemned pseudoscience, which is a way of saying that our knowledge is unproblematic). It cannot possibly work there either; but they did not see this, whereas the unviability of the complacent view in politics was too blatantly conspicuous. An adjustment was required, and Berlin provided it.

A minor problem for Gray the expositor is how this central idea can both be original and yet also possess that powerful quartet of predecessors. More serious is the question: Is the claim that values are incommensurate really so original? Were the heroes of Greek drama, for instance, strangers to the idea of an irresolvable conflict of values, say between obligations to kin and to the state? Gray fails to mention others who had made the same point in more recent times, perhaps *mit ein bisschen anderen Worten*,<sup>6</sup> for instance William James or Raymond Aron. He *does* mention Max Weber, in a truly preposterous manner: it is admitted that Weber

<sup>5</sup> 'For that very reason'.

<sup>6</sup> 'In slightly different words'.

knew about 'irreconcilable values', But Weber is then reprimanded for failing to give 'any account of the sources of such clashes [...] in conflict between different cultural forms'. This must be one of the most bizzare charges ever made, and it can be supposed only that Gray has never read Weber. Weber's fame rests precisely on the unrivalled richness of his exploration of different cultural forms, which underlie the diversity of values. He didn't merely talk about warring gods, he explored them with unequalled thoroughness and depth. He knew the warring gods, he didn't just say that they existed, and therefore made coherent thinking pointless. This is highly relevant, in so far as one of the crucial criticisms which can be made of Berlin's formulation of the rival gods problem is precisely its sociological thinness, its abstract philosophical formulation.

Another person who is unfairly ignored in tracing the roots of 'agonistic liberalism' (Gray's name for the new vision) is Bryce Gallie, whose notion of 'essentially contested concepts' is more fundamental than Berlin's stress on conflict of values: it locates the confrontation right inside the ideas and institutions of our culture, a point more radical than locating it in individuals, which is what distinguishes Berlin's formulation from the more customary stress on divergences between societies or periods. If this new brand of liberalism, based on the inherent proclivity of men or their values or ideas to be inherently, internally doomed to contestation, is to be acclaimed, it really is the height of injustice not to recognise Gallie's contribution. He highlighted this point better than anyone else.

Whose views exactly are being challenged by this claim? Who exactly was guilty of the contrary assumption of an ultimate rational harmony? Hegel, no doubt: his view of history was that in the end, all cakes are to be both retained and consumed. This is known as *Aufhebung*.<sup>7</sup> Hegel tried to combine a sense of historical diversity with the expectation of an ultimate and all-embracing consummation. Basically, he attempted to enlist diversity on the side of the Uniqueness of Truth, and steal it from the relativists. The great diversity of cultures and political systems all contribute to and are parts of a Master Plan, they are parts of a cumulative and well-directed Grand Series, and thus all of them are justified in

<sup>7</sup> 'Sublation', 'synthesis'.



their way, all of them contribute their little bit, and a little of each of them survives in the final grand synthesis. Marx, though he did not systematically expound his ideas on this point, seems to have taken over this illusion: all values, all lifestyles would, it seems, coexist under communism, without even giving any rise to problems of coordination and ordering of time. The only concrete indication he gives of communist social organisation is that it would be a kind of bohemian mega-commune, free of any timetabling and *Spießbürger*<sup>8</sup> punctuality, with totally optional and changeable roles available to all participants. Nevertheless, for some unexplained reason, these unconstrained fancy-free individuals would never get in each other's way. Agriculturalists, pastoralists, fishermen and critics at the command of their whims, it would somehow never happen that one would wish to plough where the other wished to graze, or that they would compete for space in the available critical journals. It is arguable that it was this messianic element which provided the charter for Bolshevik totalitarianism, though I suspect that it was the doctrine of the economic preconditions of the final consummation, the rigid prescriptions concerning permissible forms of economic organisation, rather than the sketch of the human content of the consummation itself, which really did for Communism, and in the end brought Marxism to its uniquely ignominious end. The bohemian unpunctuality and free choice of role identity was not practiced (though a Soviet theoretician did, not long before the end, face the embarrassing task of explaining why this bit of Marx was not due for implementation), whereas the abolition of individual control over resources was, and it was this which in the end brought down the system.

Anyway, the gimmick in the Hegel–Marxist tradition was to claim that the historically observed diversity came in a grand pattern and contributed to the terminal Happy End: diversity and even turbulence at the service of the ultimate harmony. There is no doubt that Berlin's key perception does put paid to this illusion, though I am not convinced that too many people suffer from it, or that it was really the crucial cause of modern totalitarianism. It was not the abolition of a transcendent sacred, but the sacralisation of the immanent, and in particular of the economic realm, which

<sup>8</sup> 'Philistine'.

simultaneously made it vulnerable to failure and squalor in that zone, and deprived men of a profane bolthole at times when the sacred was conspicuously tarnished.

Hegelians and their Marxist progeny are not the only candidates for being charged with pernicious hedgehog views. It might be claimed that the Utilitarians, by proposing a single measure of value (happiness, pleasure), and by their proposal of a calculus of satisfaction, were committed to the view that there was, at least, an optimal point in any problem situation, a solution which at offered the least evil. Reason might not allow us, as Hegel did, to consume and retain all cakes, but it could at least indicate the optimal cake-enjoyment point. This doesn't mean that the solution did not involve great and painful sacrifices, but at least the person facing the choice could rest assured that he had chosen the very best that was available in the circumstances. He could console himself for his sacrifices by the thought that all other choices would at least have been even more painful. Pareto-optimality (all losses compensated by an at least equal gain, but usually a greater gain) can on this view be applied to rival values as well as to rival sensibilities; it can allow inter-value comparisons as much as interpersonal ones. It is plausible to accuse the Utilitarians of assuming that a point existed in which the overall losses (to values) could be shown to be less than in any alternative situation. This is not so, and the point can be made in Berlin's way, but also in others.

It seems to me that the many thinkers who accepted the claims of reason, in the sense of supposing it capable of supplying a unique and cogent answer, did so not because they failed to notice that values conflicted and were mutually incompatible, but, more simply, because they thought that some values were valid and others invalid. In other words, they were not relativists. Perhaps they were not sure which ones were which, like the character in André Gide who wondered whether, when face to face with the deity, he could be sure that it was the true one; but they assumed that the distinction was there to be made. Recognition of conflict is nothing new: at most, the novelty lies in the vigorous affirmation of the relativism. If Gray succeeded in clearing Berlin of relativism, he would *ipso facto* undermine his own claim for Berlin's originality, for the originality, if it obtains at all, must lie precisely in the relativism, even if formulated *mit ein bisschen anderen Worten*.

Diversity of vision and values was always known – what else is new? It is precisely the endorsement of relativism, under a new name, which allows it to claim originality.

So Gray's unconvincing attempts to deny that the position he favours is relativistic, his claims for its originality, and his muddle concerning who exactly it is who contests the position, are all connected. There were many people in the past who knew of fundamental and irreconcilable conflicts of values, but they also thought that one side in these confrontations was right; in other words, they were not relativists. Are they the people whose views are now being corrected? But they knew all about conflict as such: the only thing that was missing was the relativism, the affirmation that there was no correct answer, because the contestants were 'incommensurate'.

So the 'incommensurateness' of values, which is rightly so central to Gray's exposition, is simply another way of referring to the fact that there is no way of choosing rationally between two values and considerations, that there is no common measure or idiom in which they could be expressed. It is a relativism which dares not speak its name. If in the very nature of things there were no exchange rate between dollars and yens, there is simply no answer to the question whether you should prefer a salary of  $n$  dollars or  $m$  yen, or whether a loss of  $n$  dollars can be compensated by  $m$  yen. There is no way of assessing the benefits and losses of modernity, of the transition from honour to interest, from the values of Burke or Carlyle to those of J. S. Mill or Bertrand Russell. Max Weber knew this, in his mind and in his heart, which is one reason why his discussion of modernity is superior to that of the Hegelo–Marxist tradition.

The incommensurateness thesis is simply one way of articulating relativism. It says that there is no way of moving from one language or its values to the other. Gray's dislike of Berlin being called a relativist leads him to abuse Leo Strauss as endowed with 'characteristic obtuseness and perversity'. Clearly I am guilty of the very same perversity and obtuseness, for everything Gray says, convincingly and in the main eloquently, about Berlin's position simply amounts to relativism. The avoidance of the supposed stigmata of scepticism and relativism is achieved by presenting the position as the recognition of an objective truth, namely the observation that we experience conflicts of values

between which there is no conceptual bridge, no possible adjudication. But the normal and natural way of describing this situation is as a *lack*, an *absence*, in principle, of knowledge or criteria in a given field, in brief as scepticism or relativism. Gray prefers the more positive idiom of perceiving an objective fact, namely plurality and incommensurability. But this is just verbal juggling, semantic sugar-coating. Incommensurability is not a brute fact, it is a theory, hinging on our interpretation or attitude. The facts can inform us only of a *difference*: the incommensurateness comes in with a refusal, reasoned or other, to seek or allow an idiom or norm which could compare and evaluate the differences.

It is tempting to speculate about the origins of Berlin's acute sense of irresolvable differences: can J. L. Austin and Akhmatova really belong to the same world? It is hard even to ask the question without smiling. For my money, the incommensurateness thesis has never fielded an argument more persuasive than this question. All the same, the incommensurateness thesis is not dictated by facts, it is a position adopted vis-à-vis the facts. It is not logically dictated by anything. Might I go as far as to say that the alternative of either endorsing or repudiating it is itself a choice between two positions which are themselves incommensurate? If valid, the incommensurateness thesis cannot itself be presented as a rationally compelling conclusion.

Not only does Gray in effect characterise Berlin as a relativist (whilst avoiding the word and denying the imputation), he struggles very passionately, and rather attractively, with the problem which the renamed or camouflaged relativism engenders. The truth of the plurality of incommensurate values might perhaps help liberty, by showing that no values must be imposed on anyone? Alas, this won't work, for this position also allows illiberal values their place in the sun. This is the basic trouble with the initially tempting idea of enlisting incommensurateness on the side of tolerance: the values and visions endorsed by the procedure also include total and intolerant ones, which are neither inconspicuous nor unimportant in history. In the end, in a terminal passage in which eloquence tries to plug the hole left by lack of reasons, Gray settles for a liberalism devoid of foundations. He might have said that the only way to endow it with a foundation would also be to contradict it, for the foundation would constrain our choice in a liberal direction. There is an anguished, uncomplacent quality

about this part of Gray's argument which I find endearing. He can't get out of the tangle but it is a good sign that he tries so hard, that he can sense a problem when he bumps into one.

Relativism (even when rephrased as the alleged objective perception of the plurality of incommensurable values) is not merely a problem because it leaves us hanging in the air, which people free from nervousness may find acceptable (Oakeshott, whose views have a certain resemblance to Berlin's, said that politics was *nur für Schwindelfreie*),<sup>9</sup> but also because it deprives us of the means, indeed of the right, to express deep revulsion. Given those incommensurates, how do you cope with societies which contain slavery, gulags, female circumcision, torture or gas chambers, and whose apologists might well invoke that deep pluralism? The right to female circumcision, for instance, is demanded by its victims: as good an example of incommensurate values as you'll ever find.

When dealing with his main problem – how can this kind of liberalism be saved from cutting its own throat? – Gray struggles with honesty and passion, and he is to that extent impressive. But his manner of dealing with the problem of truly repugnant societies is rapid and shallow. We may have plural and conflicting values, but there is an inner core which is shared by all of us, or very nearly so; and societies in which, for instance, 'some human beings have the status of chattels' can be condemned without worrying about incommensurability because of that 'minimum content of core human values', and, it appears, '*all* are compromised and violated' (emphasis mine) So we can exempt slavery, gulags and gas chambers because nearly all mankind does so, or because, though values may be incommensurate and the core ones themselves generate conflict (a point so heavily stressed), nevertheless these practices violate all these possibly conflicting values, so that they are damned in any case, in the name of each and every one of those warring values.

All this simply will not do: it has never been established that some global plebiscite really would condemn these practices by a convincing majority (would we vote as individuals or as cultures, and who would decide the electoral units?). In fact, the number of societies permitting slavery or similar abominations is quite high,

<sup>9</sup> 'Only for the unvertiginous'.

so that the claim to exclude them by a pan-human consensus is absurd. Still less is it the case that these practices violate all values, and for that reason cannot benefit from the argument from the legitimacy of incommensurate values. Is Aristotle to be excluded from that Oecumenical Constituent Assembly (convened, presumably, by UNESCO) which will draw up the Charter of Universal Consensual Values? Those who practiced these things did invoke certain values, whether or not we share them. Racial purity, the maintenance of a warrior ethic, the protection of the Revolution from its enemies, the maintenance of revolutionary vigilance, the implementation of the eternal Word of God. They are not my values, but they are values, and once you have deprived yourself of the means of damning values, you have to face the logical consequences. Gray's facile and superficial handling of this particular problem displays none of that perseverance and seriousness which marks and enhances his treatment of the connection between liberalism and relativism.

Like other relativists, Berlin grants himself a non-relativistic meta-theory: not merely so as to be able to articulate the theory at all, but because he allows himself a positive and general political theory, endowed with specific content. Just *because* values are plural and incommensurate, Berlin recommends politics of compromise and balance. A most commendable piece of advice, one I for one am happy to follow, but is it exempt from that pluralism of incommensurate (hence equal) values which is at the base of everything, which defines man? If it is not exempt, then who is to stop religious fundamentalists, for instance, from finding compromise on religious principle unacceptable? If it is exempt, what happens to the theory itself? This criticism has already been made by Perry Anderson, as Gray reports, but it is fundamental and deserves repetition.

Gray has placed Berlin in the context of the history of abstract thought. The map on which he is located contains two countries of roughly equal size, ancient Greece and modern Oxford, plus a few minor locations which jointly add up to about the same as the first two jointly. The fate or standing of liberty, it would seem, depends on the quality of arguments deployed in the philosophical journals. So far, I have on the whole followed Gray's conventions in this matter. But as Gray makes large claims for Berlin as a prophet of a new liberalism (claims, it must be repeated, not

endorsed by Berlin), it is also appropriate to see Berlin against the backcloth of the real world.

In this century, the fate of liberty has been rather strange. It seemed to be doing well at the beginning of the century. Then a terrible trough: the catastrophe of the First World War, the reaction of left and right anti-liberalism; a very close-run war with right illiberalism, followed by a conquest of half Europe by left illiberalism. And then, suddenly and unexpectedly, back to square one: a Whig theory of world history seems plausible after all, liberty is winning. Providentially, the world seems constructed in a manner which favours freedom. Some have concluded from this that History is at an End, that from now on mankind and freedom will live with each other, happily ever after.

I do not share this complacent optimism. Liberty has gained its victory, in modern history, thanks to the economic, and hence military, effectiveness of liberal societies. To put it brutally, it has ridden to victory on the back of consumerism. Shopkeepers and pluralists repeatedly beat warriors and true believers. Thank God for that. As long as the shopkeepers, allied to speculators and promoters, and perhaps fixers and mafiosi, and so forth, keep winning, *and* as long as the logic of their internal situation keeps them politically tolerant (whether or not they are familiar with warring gods), well and good.

But it would be utter folly to be confident that all this must necessarily continue. We have been lucky, but should not assume too complacently that the luck will hold. There are a number of dangers on the horizon for affluence-sustained liberty. (1) Government by growth cannot go on for ever, though it will go on for a time. It has enabled countries capable of attaining growth to be liberal and at the same time maintain order without traditional, brutal, and otherwise perhaps inevitable, methods. But saturation-point must be reached eventually, when the washing-machine no longer deputises for the executioner as the foundation of social order. And then? Chaos or the return of the hangman? (2) A mildly powerful technology aids liberty, a very powerful one may turn out to be its enemy. (3) Late practitioners of industrialisation, and late industrialism generally, may no longer be conducive to that individualism, which was indeed linked to early industrialism. (4) The extension of technology to the human field, if it does come about, may re-introduce extreme forms of inequality, by

making it possible, for instance, to purchase health at a high price. This in turn may undermine the affluence-induced attenuation of social conflict. It would of course also enormously enrich the police armoury. (5) Advanced industrialism both stimulates nationalism and thwarts it by engendering massive labour migrations, thereby engendering tensions which may not be contained by liberal methods. (6) Moral vacuum, a free market in incommensurate values, none of them socially or doctrinally underwritten, may not be tolerable indefinitely. (7) Societies reaching late industrialism not from a pre-industrial traditional society, but from a centralised and collapsed 'socialist' system, may in some cases be incapable of reaching even that logically incoherent but socially viable compromise which marks consumerist liberalism. They may collapse into criminalisation or neo-authoritarianism or worse, and be socially infectious. (8) Liberty in modern Europe was sustained by the multi-state system: authoritarianism never prevailed everywhere at the same time, liberty had its boltholes and could survive and then re-conquer. Modern technology, through the ecological and terrorist dangers it brings along, may necessitate the termination of political plurality. All liberal eggs may then be in the same political basket.

It behoves us to think of these dangers. Does Berlin help us? One should expect some help from a major, innovative prophet of liberalism. I very much agree with Berlin, or Berlin as presented by Gray, that his hard-nosed liberalism, based on a more perceptive account of our difficult moral situation, and perhaps inspired by an intimate experience of divergent cultures, is greatly superior to the illusions of what I call the Mayflower school, whose members suppose they can excogitate justice by stripping us naked of our cultural attributes ('the Veil of Ignorance'), and then arguing from the residual naked being, held to exemplify human nature *an sich*,<sup>10</sup> and attain a uniquely determined answer. Cultural nakedness, instead of being seen to be an absurdity, is held to engender a single, cogent, ergo harmonious, system of values. In fact, every culture has its own form of cultural nakedness, if it can rise to the idea at all, and the residual human beings engendered by this method are of an infinite variety.

<sup>10</sup> 'In itself', 'as such'.



Incommensurate values appear to be so alien to the thought or experience of members of this school that they blithely indulge in a mode of reasoning which assumes that it simply does not exist. They exist, socially speaking, in the same world as Berlin, but one can only assume that the incommensurateness of his world and theirs has prevented them from even remotely grasping his central point. Practitioners of this method in reality merely feed their own historically contingent values back to themselves, having first filtered them through scholastic argumentation, but they indulge in the illusion that their conclusions are some kind of vindication. This appears to be the most active or noisiest school of current nee-liberalism, and without any doubt Berlin's 'agonistic liberalism' is greatly superior to it. At worst, it vindicates nothing, which is better than vindicating something by logically spurious means.

But something is missing. A number of things, in fact. Berlin's account of liberalism does take into account the contribution of doubt fed by diversity and conflict, but not the importance of objectivity and transcendence. But plurality makes a contribution to freedom above all because it is felt to be problematic, because we also possess the ideal of unique and socially independent truth. Thanks to the brilliant success of natural science and mathematics, and perhaps to the propaganda of doctrinal religion, we like to think that trans-ethnic, trans-cultural, trans-political truth is indeed possible and even accessible. The possibility of criticism of a social and political order is an essential ingredient of liberty, but it doesn't make sense unless it is accepted that independent criteria are thinkable. A society which is merely a 'plural' congeries of styles and values cannot criticise any part of itself.

Such was perhaps the condition of 'pre-Axial' societies prior to the emergence of world religions, with their universalistic claims to unique truth: those earlier societies may have been participatory, but they were not liberal in the modern sense, and they would not satisfy us. Modern liberty differs from its ancient predecessor not merely in offering individual freedom rather than merely collective self-rule: it also includes the notion of trans-ethnic or trans-political truth, which is not simply engendered by a culture and its practices. This absolutely essential element is missing from (though perhaps presupposed by) the liberal vision presented in this volume. Gray discusses at length whether the pluralism in question favours liberalism, or is even compatible with it. One should also

ask whether it is sufficient, whether *monism* too was not an essential ingredient in the liberal mix. Without it, this new liberal revelation might not work at all. As for the pitiful argument from some kind of lowest common denominator or shared core values, indulged in half-heartedly and very perfunctorily by Gray, that will not do at all.

The other element which is missing is some kind of hard, concrete sense of the social context of liberal practices, such as is found, for instance, in the work of Max Weber, so bizarrely misrepresented by Gray. Berlin has always been somewhat dismissive of sociology: he may well be right that there is no impressive bank of either nomological or evolutionary discoveries in that field. But it is good to try to look at what happens to liberty in the real world. Can liberty really be at the mercy of extremely abstruse and difficult arguments such as those found in Gray's book, which a professional don such as myself only follows with considerable difficulty (and sometimes not at all)? This book gives the impression that the fate of liberty is decided only in the realm of thought, and of a rather selective history of thought at that. Should we not also look at some more earthy matters? If, at one end, this philosophy is insufficiently preoccupied with transcendence and objectivity, then, at the other end, it is far too ethereal, it gives the impression that the history of ideas is everything, or very nearly, and that non-intellectual constraints need not concern us, and that the battle of liberty will be won or lost in abstruse argument, inaccessible to the generality. This is a weakness the expositor shares, I fear, with his subject.

Gray does, however, make a perceptive remark when he observes that some of Berlin's views can be put in the jargon of postmodernism. No incommensurability between Berlin and this recent fashion, it would seem: translation is possible, and Gray does offer a brief translation. It is well up to the worst standards of postmodernist prose. There is indeed a surprising overlap of 'agonistic liberalism' and the wilder shores of current relativistic and subjectivistic fashion. The motives and style may be quite different: the postmodernists may preach that worlds are 'socially constructed', so as to give them something to 'deconstruct', and to make sure that no one world may claim authority. Their relativism is a form of expiation for the sins of imperial subjection: objective truth ratified domination, so relativism endorses equality of

cultures. All visions must be equal so that no man should be less equal than any other. (It does not follow, and I suspect that the opposite inference is valid: there must be objective truth if men are to be able to appeal against injustice and oppression.) Then the ‘social construction’ argument (read: incommensurateness) can be used to dismiss, or to validate, the ideas of any culture, at will. This can ensure that the last are first and the first, last. The postmodernists use such relativism brazenly, to damn their enemies and underwrite their friends.

Berlin’s relativism, presented as the recognition of incommensurateness, is not (as far as I know) meant as a form of expiation of anything, but as the lucid recognition of the human condition, and here Gray is right (even if he wrongly thinks that this does not amount to relativism). The argument is used to fortify liberalism, but the effort is haunted by the valid perception that what is sauce for the liberal goose is sauce for the illiberal gander: the argument is too strong, its beneficiaries too numerous, and some of them are most unwelcome, but there is no way of excluding them from the agonistic feast. At least in Gray’s presentation, the tentative fusion of the relativism (read the ‘agonistic’ element in the liberalism) with the endorsement of one’s own vision is appropriately tormented, rather than complacent. Incommensurability of values is not invoked simply as a charter for imperturbability. Gray tries hard to make it work, and fails most becomingly. But even if the motive and above all the style of postmodernism and agonistic liberalism differ, there really is a genuine overlap of underlying content. Gray is quite right there. Perhaps one might call Berlin the Savile Row postmodernist.

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<sup>11</sup> Revised in August 1995.