Isaiah Berlin
The Last Coherent Liberal?

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This sermon was delivered on 24 January 1999 by Robert W. Haney (1934–2005) at the (Unitarian Universalist) Theodore Parker Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, of which he was Minister from 1981 to 2001. The text is held in the Harvard Divinity School library, Harvard University, in Haney's Papers (bMS 194, Box 7, Folder 5). Thanks are due to the library for providing a copy of the sermon, and to Arthur Lidsky and Joanna Lubkin for their help in clearing the way for publication. Two readings from Berlin and 'Words for Meditation' that refer to him were used earlier in the same service, and appear at the end of the sermon below.

Bob Haney at his retirement party in 2001

People who have once been, as the saying goes, 'in the public eye', but who have disappeared from view for many a year, have only three ways of reinviting public interest. They may suddenly appear on one or more television talk shows; they may once again display their talents – if only to a limited degree; or they may die.

I was reminded of the first approach by the announcement the other day that Esther Williams was going to be guest on the Rosie O'Donnell Show. My immediate reaction to the news was: 'I didn't know that Esther Williams is alive.'

A happy example of the second approach was provided by a recent instalment of the *Inspector Morse* series on WGBH-TV. Who should appear as the superannuated chancellor of an Oxford College[1] but Sir John Gielgud, spouting pomposities in his exquisitely refined voice. His brief performance provided a very restorative antidote to the President's[2] State of the Union Address, and to the commentaries that followed.

The third approach, although fatal, is the safest of the three, for the other two are more likely than not to be embarrassing. After the death of Sir Isaiah Berlin in early November of 1997 at the age of eighty-eight, the *New York Times* printed his obituary on its front page, and the flood of articles and reviews and tributes continues unabated. The current public interest in him is all the more remarkable, because, during his lifetime, his reputation was largely limited to academic circles.

Those of you who are well acquainted with me know that, just about now, I would normally launch into a succinct, but perhaps too detailed, biography of my subject. You will be happy to learn that I am not going to do that this morning, because Isaiah Berlin's external life was extraordinarily dull. Berlin basically lived a life of the mind. People who knew him report that he was a superb companion for lunch or dinner, followed, perhaps, by conversation over a glass of post-prandial port.[3] In recent years, it

[1] sc. Oxford University.

[2] Bill Clinton.

[3] Berlin did not drink alcohol.

is said, he talked too much and listened too little; but such talk! It was filled with inviting allusions, revealing perceptions, and many a droll anecdote.

Born into a Russian Jewish family in Riga, Latvia,[4] he grew up in what is now once again called St Petersburg, where he witnessed the beginnings of Bolshevik thuggery. With his immediate family he soon moved to Great Britain, where he studied at Oxford. Apart from service in the British Embassy in Washington during the Second World War, the rest of his long life was spent at Oxford. Preferring shorter forms to the ponderous tome, he produced a few dozen essays combining great breadth of thought, astonishing clarity of language, and gentle good humour. Beginning as a philosopher, he found his métier as a historian of ideas, and it is in that role that I recommend him to your attention.

Johannes Bakker,[5] whom many of you know as our church's scholarly Unitarian friend from Canada, asked me a few weeks ago if I currently have any intellectual heroes. A long pause followed. He mercifully ended it by saying: 'Well, I guess you don't have any right now. But not even Schleiermacher?'

'No,' I said, 'not even Schleiermacher. But I am just beginning to read Isaiah Berlin, and I think he may make a good candidate for the job.'

Ah, but I hasten to add that I am not trying to convert you this morning. I merely invite you to reflect upon what you may believe you are *expected* to think, to reflect upon what you *truly* think, and then to reflect upon *Berlin's* personal conclusions.

In a century that has seen the world torn asunder by authoritarianisms of all sorts – political, economic, religious – and that ends with the world's peoples as adrift and as divided as ever before, we ought to ask ourselves, 'What went wrong?'

We went wrong, Isaiah Berlin tells us, by the mistaken ideas in our heads. Advances in the sciences had led us to believe not only that a fundamental order, based upon natural laws, exists in the

[4] Livonia at the time.

[5] Cornelis Johannes ('Neil') Bakker (1917–2014), Unitarian minister.

world around us, but that we could discover it and apply its rules to our every need. Those applications have come to include every area of human experience, from the planning of our economies to the raising of our children. We chose to believe that for every need there is a science, and for every science there are immutable rules.

Hence, we tell ourselves, were we more knowledgeable, all the rules could be expressed mathematically – as the fundamental laws of nature can be, or as we want to think – and all the best minds of this century have been nibbling away at the cliffs and volcanoes of our ignorance. One thing is certain (we tell ourselves): we are making progress toward comprehending, if not conquering, the ultimate Truth that governs all things.

In contrast, Berlin argues that most Western thought, whether it be theological, or philosophical, or scientific, suffers from a fundamental mistake. It assumes that there is some one entity or rule, some *one* principle or process that explains everything. This being the case, you and I can go on to assume that every practical problem – especially those concerned with how to live a good life – can be solved by appeal to the one great universal Truth. In most societies, woe to the minorities who disagree with the majorities in identifying that Truth. Or woe to the apathetic who disagree with the zealous!

In his anthropology, Berlin is significantly Romantic (with a capital 'R'), and, to a limited degree, an Existentialist. Opposing determinism, he argues that individual identities are self-created but are *limited* by the constraints imposed by nature, history, biology and culture. In the best Romantic and Existentialist tradition, I suspect he would assert that the people whom we are most likely to remember are those who defiantly seek to transcend those constraints. However, the people who accomplish the most for the greater good of all are those who rework those limits to form something beautiful and significant for their place, even as a potter reworks a mound of clay.

If one word lies at the heart of Berlin's world-view it is this: *pluralism*.

The word does not merely refer to the fact that a great variety of cultures and subcultures exists around this planet – and in our own backyards. Nor does it merely embrace the ethical consequences – sometimes respected by the liberally minded – that that variety merits our high regard and protection.

For Berlin, 'pluralism' entails the realisation that people are more likely than not to disagree significantly on purposes and the means of achieving them. There being no fundamental order governing the affairs of the human mind or heart – or, as some contemporary scientists would argue, governing anything else – we find ourselves, if we are faithful to our experience, participating in a great planetary conversation, involving people who *perceive* life differently and have different expectations of it.

Since our resulting values are based upon different standards, there can be little unanimity among us, and to expect otherwise is to indulge in a perilous form of self-deception.

If I may extrapolate from those conclusions, then I think that I should assert – although Berlin never does so – that a good many of our own country's efforts around the world, including many of those in the United Nations, are fundamentally flawed, because they seek to impose Western – or specifically American – norms on the rest of the world. If we possessed any historical sense – if we were aware of the essential pluralism of all human experience – we would talk less and listen more. We would certainly not take pride in the fundamentally barbaric notion that our country should rule the world, or does. *Tout passe*, and nothing disappears more quickly than national significance.

Our proper task, Berlin tells us, is to honour the variety of human experience, while cherishing our own approaches to living. It is to respect the quest for a larger liberty among *all* peoples, even though we shall probably disagree with some of their goals, even as they find inadequacies in some of ours. There is nothing eternally sacred, after all, about the American Way of Life.

I find one of the most exciting things in Berlin's essays to be his celebration of the great variety of ways in which people choose to live and give meaning to their lives. Unlike the teachers of

doctrines or of scientific principles, he honours the responsiveness of people to the unknowable – even when he disagrees with them. He respects people like you and me – sometimes rational, sometimes irrational.

I think that Isaiah Berlin, unlike so many philosophers, profoundly enjoyed the uncertainties and perplexities of living. All by itself, his example in that regard is a splendid legacy.

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The following items were also used in the service:

First reading

> There are, in my view, two factors that, above all others, have shaped human history in the twentieth century. One is the development of the natural sciences and technology, certainly the greatest success story of our time – to this, great and mounting attention has been paid from all quarters. The other, without doubt, consists in the great ideological storms that have altered the lives of virtually all mankind: the Russian Revolution and its aftermath – totalitarian tyrannies of both right and left and the explosions of nationalism, racism and, in places, religious bigotry which, interestingly enough, not one among the most perceptive social thinkers of the nineteenth century had ever predicted.
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> When our descendants, in two or three centuries' time (if mankind survives until then), come to look at our age, it is these two phenomena that will, I think, be held to be the outstanding characteristics of our century – the most demanding of explanation and analysis. But it is as well to realise that these great movements began with ideas in people's heads: ideas about what relations between men have been, are, might be and should be; and to realise how they came to be transformed in the name of a vision of some supreme goal in the minds of the leaders, above all of the prophets with armies at their backs. Such ideas are the substance of ethics.
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> If we are to hope to understand the often violent world in which we live (and unless we try to understand it, we cannot expect to be able to act rationally in it and on it), we cannot confine our attention to the great impersonal forces, natural and man-made, which act upon us. The goals and motives that guide human action must be looked at in the light of all

> that we know and understand; their roots and growth, their essence, and above all their validity, must be critically examined with every intellectual resource that we have. This urgent need, apart from the intrinsic value of the discovery of truth about human relationships, makes ethics a field of primary importance. Only barbarians are not curious about where they come from, how they came to be where they are, where they appear to be going, whether they wish to go there, and if so, why, and if not, why not.
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> From 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', CTH2 1–2

Second reading

Our second reading comes from another essay by Isaiah Berlin – this one focusing on the criticisms of the European Enlightenment by Johann Gottfried Herder, an eighteenth-century German philosopher, historian and critic.* In this part of the essay, Berlin point to the dominant motif of Western thought, while noting a couple of minority criticisms.

> What is the best life for men? And, more particularly: What is the most perfect society?
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> There is, after all, no dearth of solutions. Every age has provided its own formulae. Some have looked for the solution in sacred books or in revelation or in the words of inspired prophets or the tradition of organised priesthoods; others found it in the rational insight of the skilled metaphysician, or in the combination of scientific observation and experiment, or in the 'natural' good sense of men not 'scribbled over' by philosophers or theologians or perverted by 'interested error'. Still others have found it only in the uncorrupted heart of the simple good man. Some thought that only trained experts could discover great and saving truths; others supposed that on questions of value all sane men were equally well qualified to judge. Some maintained that such truths could be discovered at any time, and that it was mere bad luck that it had taken so long to find the most important among them, or that they had been so easily forgotten. Others held that mankind was subject to the law of growth; and that the truth would not be seen in its fullness until mankind had reached maturity – the age of reason. Some doubted even this, and said men could never attain to such knowledge on earth; or if they did, were too weak to follow it in practice, since such perfection was attainable only by angels, or in the life hereafter. But one as-

sumption was common to all these views: that it was, at any rate in principle, possible to draw some outline of the perfect society or the perfect man, if only to define how far a given society or a given individual fell short of the ideal. This was necessary if one was to be able to compare degrees of imperfection.

But this belief in the final objective answer has not been absolutely universal. Relativists held that different circumstances and temperaments demanded different policies; but, for the most part, even they supposed that, though the routes might differ, the ultimate goal – human happiness, the satisfaction of human wishes – was one and the same. Some sceptical thinkers in the ancient world […] went further and uttered the disquieting thought that some ultimate values might be incompatible with one another, so that no solution could logically incorporate them all. There was something of this doubt about the logic of the concept of the perfect society not only among the Greeks, but in the Renaissance too, in Pontano, in Montaigne, in Machiavelli, and after them in Leibniz and Rousseau, who thought that no gain could be made without a corresponding loss.

Something of this, too, seemed to lie at the heart of the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare. Nevertheless, the central stream of the Western tradition was little affected by this fundamental doubt. The central assumption was that problems of value were in principle soluble, and soluble with finality. Whether the solutions could be implemented by imperfect men was another question, a question which did not affect the rationality of the universe. This is the keystone of the classical arch which, after Herder, began to crumble.

From 'Herder and the Enlightenment', TCE2 287–8

* (Parenthetically, perhaps I should note that while, these days, most well-educated Americans have never heard of Herder, his writings were very much in vogue in Boston in the 1830s and 1840s. As a forefather of German Romanticism, he was much admired by the Transcendentalists. Our own Theodore Parker was very pleased with himself when he acquired a complete set of Herder's works, which I trust he eagerly read – in German, of course.)

Words for Meditation

Since Isaiah Berlin invites us to reconsider our views of the world and our place in it, we might profitably use several minutes of silent reflection followed by several more melodious minutes, to ask ourselves exactly what our views are on these matters. How does it happen that we are who we are, and where are we going? How do we fit into the grand scheme of things – or is there, indeed, a grand scheme? And what are the consequences of our answers? This is obviously a take-home exam, but this is a good place to get started.

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