

Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry

RYAN PATRICK HANLEY *Marquette University*

Isaiah Berlin is remembered for his positive/negative liberty distinction and his value pluralism, but he was also an active participant in the debate over the nature of political inquiry. This essay argues that his neglected contribution to this debate is central to his thought and a valuable resource in today's debate over political science's methods and ends. I first show how Berlin understood the relationship of empirical science to humanistic study. I then demonstrate that his conceptions of political judgment and the "sense of reality" were intended as alternatives to the scientific pursuit of political knowledge. Finally, I argue that his Churchill and Weizmann essays present exemplars of the moral excellence Berlin considered necessary to ennoble liberal society and the political understanding indispensable to comprehensive political inquiry. I conclude by noting how Berlin's critique of scientific political inquiry informs his liberalism and his own methods of political inquiry.

Political scientists are currently witnessing a resurgence of an old debate. The question of whether the study of politics is better regarded as an art or a science is again on the minds of political inquirers. In part this new debate but continues a familiar one over the place of political theory within political science.¹ Yet the fundamental question at issue today—namely, “Can we know what is worth knowing about politics through scientific research methods alone?”—is hardly limited to theorists (Grant 2002, 578). Recently political scientists in other subfields have also called attention to the unique nature of their inquiry; witness Rogers Smith (2002), who has observed that political science is distinct from the other sciences insofar as its subject is human beings and its conclusions affect its subject in ways those of other sciences cannot. Put differently, if political science aspires to afford its subjects a better understanding of themselves as well as improve their lives, it is humanistic in its ends even if scientific in its means, and it has even been said that a “student of society, for the very sake of being a scientist, must first and above all be a humanist” (Cook 1955, 272). But what does this mean? Precisely what—if any—sort of “humanism” should science in general and political science in particular embrace?

Among the last century's most careful students of this question was Isaiah Berlin. Today Berlin is remembered above all for his delineation of two types of liberty and his value pluralism (e.g., Galston 1999, Gray 1996, and Riley 2001). Recent work has also done much to recover his significance as a historian of ideas (e.g., Cracraft 2002 and Wokler 2003). Yet his legacy deserves further reconsideration. In the 1950s, the same decade that saw the publication of his most famous

essays on liberty, his was also a principal voice in the quarrel between the sciences and the humanities.² In part his contribution to this debate took the form of an attempt to define the proper place of political theory in political science (Berlin [1962] 1999; cf. White 2002). Yet on the whole Berlin was less interested in the practice of professional political theorists than in political practice itself, and two of his most urgent concerns were to illustrate the dangers posed by applying the methods of natural science to political practice and political inquiry and to promote the recovery of an alternative and nonscientific approach to political understanding.

Below I focus on Berlin's largely neglected work on political judgment and the methods of the social sciences to present his conception of the promise and the limits of scientific political inquiry.³ These essays—particularly those on the political judgment of Winston Churchill and Chaim Weizmann—are central to Berlin's political thought, I argue, as they provide the natural culmination to an inquiry that began with his study of Marx's and Tolstoy's philosophies of history. The paper's next section examines Berlin's essays on scientific history, focusing on their discussion of the place of empirical science in humanistic study. I then turn to Berlin's contemporaneous essays on judgment and the “sense of reality” to show how his study of scientific history's methods informed his evaluation of the methods of political inquiry. Here I argue that his claim against scientific history—that misapplying the methods of natural science in historical research precludes moral judgment under the guise of objectivity and neutrality—was the basis of his claim that scientific political inquiry encourages a positivism that denies individual human agency and, by extension, individual

Ryan Patrick Hanley is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Marquette University, 540 N. 15th Street, Milwaukee, WI 53233 (ryan.hanley@marquette.edu).

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¹ For the current debate over the place of political theory in political science, see, e.g., Shapiro 2002; Skinner et al. 2002, 14–15; and Smith 2002. For the antecedents of this debate in the 1950s, see, e.g., Easton 1951, Eckstein 1956, and Friedrich 1958 and, in Britain, Greaves 1960.

² This quarrel reached its peak in Britain in the 1950s with Leavis 1962 and Snow [1959] 1998. On the manifestations of this quarrel in contemporary political science owing to the challenges posed by behavioralism, see, e.g., Behnegar 2003, 9–27, and Gunnell 1986, 10–42.

³ The present essay thus does not aspire to intervene in the debate over the compatibility of value pluralism and liberalism but to illuminate Berlin's critique of rationalism and to respond to the call for further study of his understanding of statesmanship and political judgment (see Lilla, Dworkin, and Silvers 2001, xii).

excellence. The paper then turns to the essays on Churchill and Weizmann to argue that Berlin intended these to provide models both of the sort of moral excellence that he believed to be threatened by scientific determinism yet indispensable to modern politics and of a particular approach to political understanding that he considered indispensable to any comprehensive political inquiry. By so doing I aim to shed new light on this forgotten side of Berlin's project as well as point to its implications for the current debate over the scientific study of politics.

SCIENTIFIC DETERMINISM AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

Berlin's inquiry into the effects of the incursions of natural science methodology on political and historical study began in his *Karl Marx* (KM; 1939),⁴ was further developed in "The Hedgehog and the Fox" ([1953a] 1994) and "Historical Inevitability" ([1954a] 2002), and received final, conclusive statements in "The Concept of Scientific History" ([1960a] 1999) and his essay on Vico ([1960b] 2000). Taken together, these essays define and critically assess an emerging development in social science and suggest an alternative approach to the study of history.

The target of Berlin's criticism in these essays is, broadly, scientific determinism. Scientific determinism, on his definition, is comprised of two elements: first, "monism"—the belief that there exist single, discoverable, final solutions to all conceptual problems (political problems included)—and, second, a belief in the existence of inexorable forces to which all human affairs, historical and political, are subject. "Historical Inevitability" ([1954a] 2002) trains its sights on both phenomena. It particularly aims to expose the dangers of a social science dedicated to the systematic pursuit of "one complete and all-embracing pyramid of scientific knowledge; one method; one truth; one scale of rational, 'scientific' values"—a pursuit Berlin does not hesitate to castigate as a "naïve craving for unity and symmetry at the expense of experience" (L, 96; cf. KM, 30). Students of his political theory will recognize here the foundations of his value pluralism. Yet it is crucial to an understanding of his intentions to see that his objection to monism was not simply to its idea of a single truth, but to its notion of a single truth scientifically discovered (see also Hausheer 1983, 51–57).

As both a historian of ideas and a political theorist Berlin indeed was fascinated and worried by those "hypnotised by the magnificent progress of the natural sciences of their day" (CC, 106–7). He knew that the

extraordinary successes of scientific methods in certain fields of inquiry were likely to seduce those in other fields seeking comparable successes: hence the quarrel of the natural sciences and humanities launched by Descartes and continued by those who applied the methods of the former to the subjects of the latter (TCE, 9, 28–29, 37–40, 112). Berlin also foresaw the consequences of pursuing historical and political inquiry in accord with the Cartesian preference for the "principles and rules which alone guarantee scientific validity" (CC, 103). His own empiricism led him to be particularly wary of the distorted perspective that necessarily follows when such methods are used to interpret historical data. Marx and Tolstoy revealed this to him most clearly. Both thinkers, he claims, "saw clearly that if history was a science, it must be possible to discover and formulate a set of true laws of history which, in conjunction with the data of empirical observation, would make prediction of the future... as feasible as it had become, say, in geology or astronomy" (RT, 32). The target of Berlin's attack is precisely this misguided faith in history's discoverable laws—"the belief that everything is caused to occur as it does by the machinery of history itself" or by "impersonal forces" (L, 103). Thus he insists that the quest to discover "inexorable, all-pervasive historical laws" alone capable of revealing a "unitary pattern" blinds the scientific historian to a better way of seeing historical connections (L, 55, 155; cf. CC, 104–7; KM, 115). Berlin indeed considers anathema that conception of inquiry in which understanding is reduced to the ability to see patterns, and wisdom reduced to a knack for seeing in which direction the world is inexorably moving (L, 104, 113).

Berlin then presents two objections to the scientific approach to history: one on the grounds of its impracticality and another on the grounds of its consequences. His first objection rests on his insistence that it is fundamentally misguided to claim that "all that exists is necessarily an object in material nature, and therefore susceptible to explanation by scientific laws" (L, 108). Berlin hardly denies science its successes and readily grants its utility when limited to its proper objects. His fear is rather that science is too often led in its enthusiasm to overreach. The historical record, he insists, is too complex to be adequately treated by its methods. This too is noted by Tolstoy. The second appendix to *War and Peace* reveals the folly of attempting to subject the infinite complexity of the "uninspectable" elements of the moral and political and spiritual worlds to fixed rules (RT, 73; cf. SR, 33). Berlin's agreement with Tolstoy on this point is evident in his own claim that no single human being can grasp the unfathomable array of factual complexity necessary for a truly comprehensive and "scientific" understanding of that "larger scheme of things" of which we are a part (RT, 74; SR, 15, 34n). Berlin of course was no reactionary, and he was quick to place the label of "an absurd nostalgic delusion" on the belief that natural science and technology "prevents us from direct contact with reality—'being'—which pre-Socratic Greeks or medieval Europeans saw face to

⁴ In referring to Berlin's works I use the following abbreviations: AC—*Against the Current*; CC—*Concepts and Categories*; CTH—*The Crooked Timber of Humanity*; FB—*Freedom and Its Betrayal*; KM—*Karl Marx*, L—*Liberty*; PI—*Personal Impressions*; POI—*Power of Ideas*; RT—*Russian Thinkers*; SR—*The Sense of Reality*; TCE—*Three Critics of the Enlightenment*; WE—"Weizmann as Exilarch"; and ZPW—*Zionist Politics in Wartime Washington*. These abbreviations are given in brackets after the appropriate references in the References.

face.” His claim is more modest: “My argument is only that not everything, in practice, can be—indeed that a great deal cannot be—grasped by the sciences” (SR, 48).

As the sciences cannot grasp everything, Berlin concludes that there must exist a sphere in which “human categories” rather than scientific categories apply: “namely the world of human beings” (L, 19; cf. TCE, 43). History—what Aristotle describes as the record of what human beings have done and thought and suffered—is the preeminent account of this sphere (AC, 95; PI, 10; CC, 103; Cracraft 2002, 296–97). Such a view of history contains within itself a critique of scientific history. Historical study is distinguished by the unique nature of the inquirer’s relationship to his subject matter. As history and politics are human activities and reflections of human beings themselves, their study is necessarily self-referential and, unlike natural science, demands a certain intimacy between inquirer and subject: “In history we are the actors; in the natural sciences mere spectators” (TCE, 88; cf. 161). For this reason, students of “human affairs” must neither begin with nor aspire to an objective or neutral analysis of data: “Here I am not primarily an external observer, but myself an actor; I understand other human beings, and what it is to have motives, feelings, or follow rules, because I am human myself” (CC, 129). Thus “wholly depersonalised history” is “a figment of abstract theory,” as historians will find it impossible “to suppress even that minimal degree of moral or psychological insight and evaluation which is necessarily involved in viewing human beings as creatures with purposes and motives” (L, 140–41). On these grounds Berlin calls historians to abandon all aspirations to the perspective of detached spectators and calls them, instead, to strive to understand their subjects “from the inside” (AC, 95). Berlin took this lesson in part from his study of Vico, who impressed on him the necessity of “entering into” the past and understanding men and their actions internally (TCE, 18–19, 31, 47–50, 52, 65, 129; CC, 137). The lesson was reinforced by his study of Herder’s conception of *Einfühlen*, that natural and irrepressible sympathy that binds inquirer to subject and enables each to recognize the uniquely human status of the other (TCE, 14, 211–12, 236, 318). To privilege “some infallible scientific key” over Vico and Herder’s imaginative sympathetic method Berlin considered “one of the most grotesque claims ever made by human beings” (SR, 21; cf. Cracraft 2002, 292).

To understand why Berlin uses the language of the grotesque to describe what seems to be a mere methodological error requires examining his thoughts on the political consequences of scientific determinism. In one sense, these consequences are well known to students of his political theory. The slippery slope from monism to totalitarianism is a prominent feature of his most familiar work: that faith in the “inexorable” must lead to “demands for human sacrifice” (L, 106n; cf. 212). Yet Berlin rejects determinism not only on the grounds of its political consequences, but also for its moral consequences. Thus his more subtle charge is that determinism claims that “individual responsibility is, ‘in the end,’

an illusion,” as “the individual’s freedom of choice (at any rate here, below) is ultimately an illusion” (L, 107, 110). Determinism aspires to bring a “happy release from responsibility” and to eradicate all standards for moral judgment, and it is this claim that Berlin rejects and counters by reestablishing the reality and necessity of free choice to a fully human life (L, 160; cf. FB, 32). Indeed, Berlin’s famous defense of free choice via negative liberty is itself an element of this larger project to reestablish an appreciation of the moral responsibility and agency of individual political actors (L, 27, 115, 131).

The crux of Berlin’s argument against determinism is then that it inhibits the natural judgments of the inquirer—the very judgments encouraged by the sympathy that binds inquirer to subject. The detached inquirer rejects these; to suppose nothing, to propose nothing, to impose nothing, and only to explain—such is his ostensible goal (L, 125, 127). But even if such a degree of detachment could be achieved, would it be desirable? Berlin thinks that it would permit us to say nothing more than that “Alexander, Caesar, Atilla, Muhammad, Cromwell, Hitler are like floods and earthquakes, sunsets, oceans, mountains; we may admire or fear them, welcome or curse them, but to denounce or extol their acts is (ultimately) as sensible as addressing sermons to a tree” (L, 115–16). So conceived, determinism is not merely an assault on agency, but a concerted attempt “to overthrow some of the most deeply rooted moral and intellectual habits of human beings” (L, 163). In particular, it assaults decent common opinions about what is “morally praiseworthy or blameworthy” and what constitutes “worth and desert” (L, 116n). Thus Berlin’s most forceful charge against scientific determinism is that its surface objectivity conceals a decided prejudice against the received common morality it seeks to displace, as its goal is to demonstrate that “moral responsibility is a pre-scientific fiction” or “delusion” and that “praise and blame are subjective attitudes put to flight by the advance of knowledge” (L, 138, 154; cf. 6, 21, 103, 118, 122, 268–69; RT, 69). It is precisely this subjectivism that he challenges in reestablishing against determinism the possibility that men in fact aspire to “deserve (and not merely elicit or respond to) praise and blame, approval or condemnation” (L, 110). Hence his repeated insistence on “the assumption of the reality of human choices” and “the sense of mission and dedication, the voice of duty” that he thought the twentieth century must recapture if it was to survive itself (L, 121, 127). Put differently, Berlin calls for a recovery of a sense of honor derived from acting honorably and an appreciation of the difference between what is praiseworthy and what is praised.

The positivist assault on moral judgment, Berlin concludes, is nothing less than an assault on the “central values . . . common to human beings as such, that is, for practical purposes, to the great majority of men in most places and times” (L, 25). Indeed far from rejecting these, Berlin, like Hume, calls political inquirers to respect “the normal thoughts of ordinary men” and “the language of common sense” (L, 138, 142; POI,

20–21).⁵ Berlin in fact was deeply sympathetic to Tolstoy's claim that "only by patient empirical observation could any knowledge be obtained," but also to his claim that "simple people often know the truth better than learned men, because their observation of men and nature is less clouded by empty theories" (RT, 55). Better than that historians join to their empirical labors this prereflective form of judgment than an enthusiasm for methods or laws. For historians, being themselves men, can never expect to "escape from having to adopt some position about what matters and how much"—an inescapability that, he insists, "alone is enough to render the notion of a 'value-free' history, of the historian as a transcriber *ipsis rebus dictantibus*, an illusion" (L, 23). To have values is to be human, and for this reason Berlin could never subscribe to the "morally 'neutral' attitude of natural scientists" (L, 141). To accept their "imaginary scientific canon which distinguishes between facts and values very sharply" would be to "do violence to the basic notions of our morality" and, thereby, fail "to face the fact of human responsibility." Thus Berlin's final word on the scientific historians: "They throw dust in their own eyes as well as in ours, obstruct our vision of the real world, and further confuse an already sufficiently bewildered public about the relations of morality to politics, and about the nature and methods of the natural sciences and historical studies alike" (L, 163–65).

POLITICAL JUDGMENT AND THE SENSE OF REALITY

Berlin's critique of scientific history rests on the claim that its idealism glosses over the complexity of historical and political reality. In this respect his critique of idealism in political inquiry mirrors his contemporaneous critique of idealism in political theory and political practice. Berlin of course presented his response to political idealism in his lecture on two concepts of liberty (Skinner 2002b, 239–43). But what solution does he offer to the former problem, that of idealism in inquiry? His answer is to be found in his exposition of the "sense of reality," the idea at the heart of his thoughts on historical and political judgment and understanding. Berlin develops his thoughts on the sense of reality in another set of essays of the 1950s, concurrent with and intimately tied to his critique of scientific determinism. Taken together, these essays—"Realism in History" ([1953b] 1996), "Realism in Politics" ([1954b] 2002), and "Political Judgement" ([1957] 1966)—further develop and push toward completion the critique of scientific determinism examined above.⁶

⁵ For Berlin's debt to Hume, see, e.g., Gray 1996, 9 (cf. 81–82); Hampshire 1991, 129; and Wollheim 1991, 78. Also, Berlin's claim here and elsewhere that human affairs depend upon "the moral categories and concepts which normal language incorporates and expresses" (L, 163) suggests the residual influence of the Oxford philosophy in which he was trained, and particularly the understanding of "ordinary language" advanced by J. L. Austin among others (see PI, 139–42).

⁶ The essay reprinted as "The Sense of Reality" in the book of the same title was originally delivered as a lecture at Smith College in 1953 under the title "Realism in History."

What then is the "sense of reality," and what is its relationship to Berlin's critique of determinism? We have already seen him allege that determinism assaults the decent moral sentiments and judgments of common life. But precisely that which science rejects he reclaims for the sense of reality. "What in ordinary life we call adequate explanations often rest not on specific pieces of scientific reasoning, but on our experience in general, on our capacity for understanding the habits of thought and action that are embodied in human attitudes and behaviour, on what is called knowledge of life, sense of reality" (CC, 128). The proper antidote to the myopic monistic understanding of human behavior is thus not philosophic wisdom but wisdom of a different sort. The "knowledge of life" that is synonymous with the sense of reality is discovered not through solitary contemplation—to which Berlin is consistently hostile, though often more content to caricature than repudiate—but instead "springs from interaction with others and with the surrounding environment" (CC, 134). To depart from scientific methods is thus not to abandon science for philosophy, or to embrace that which "in some way 'transcends' or is 'beyond' normal experience"—"some special act of magical divination not describable in the language of ordinary experience." Berlin instead recommends a process that enters "intimately into our most normal experience, and is a kind of automatic integration of a very large number of data too fugitive and various to be mounted on the pin of some scientific process" (SR, 24). The sense of reality is perhaps best understood as a refined common sense, a skeptical alternative to the claims of both social science and philosophy.

Neither scientific nor philosophical, the sense of reality is essentially practical and political, and Berlin presents it in language reminiscent of Aristotle's account of practical wisdom. Thus he explains that the sense of reality lies neither in "some transcendent sense of the inexpressible oneness of life to which poets, mystics and metaphysicians have in all ages testified" nor in a deeper awareness of "the 'iron laws' of the sciences." The sort of understanding he admires is instead that of "the permanent relationships of things, and the universal texture of human life, wherein alone truth and justice are to be found by a kind of 'natural'—somewhat Aristotelian—knowledge." And like that of Aristotle's *phronimos*, such knowledge rests on "an awareness, not necessarily explicit or conscious," or even one capable of being articulated by its owner (RT, 69–71). But where are such wise men to be found, if not among scientists or philosophers? At times Berlin points to Tolstoy (RT, 50); at other times, to his characters (RT, 74). But to see it at its peak, he turns to two other groups: "historians and novelists and dramatists and ordinary persons endowed with understanding of life," and statesmen (SR, 25, 47; POI, 138, 188; cf. Cracraft 2002, 287).

Berlin's account of the historian's sense of reality in "Realism in History" begins with the now familiar critiques of inexorability, the search for patterns, and the reverence for the "machinery of determinism" (SR, 1–2). Yet for all this he never calls the historian to abandon the epic theorist's attempt to understand human

experience as a whole; the “*Wirkungszusammenhang*, the general structure or pattern of experience,” is in fact “absolutely indispensable to the historian” (CC, 139). His point is rather that a means of pursuing comprehensive understanding other than those offered by scientific methods must be discovered. The precision afforded by such methods, he insists, is achieved at the cost of a more comprehensive understanding of the entirety of experience. Again like Aristotle, Berlin insists that inquirers should strive only for that level of precision that is appropriate to the nature of their subjects: “to preach mechanical precision, even in principle, in a field incapable of it is to be blind and to mislead others” (SR, 53). In historical inquiry the reduction of the complexity of experience to precise patterns of elegant simplicity misses the “total texture” of human history, compounded “of literally countless strands” (CC, 114). What is required is rather a way of seeing and understanding that, in charting patterns, captures rather than denies that “‘thick’ texture” of conflicting ideas, beliefs and events of which the historical record is comprised (CC, 139; SR, 30–31).

In rejecting determinism Berlin thus calls for a recovery of judgment. In response to detractors skeptical of the “mysterious capacity” of “the so-called faculty of judgment” (CC, 116), he explains that historians require

a capacity for integration, for perceiving qualitative similarities and differences, a sense of the unique fashion in which various factors combine in the particular concrete situation . . . The capacities needed are rather those of association than of dissociation, of perceiving the relation of parts to wholes, of particular sounds or colours to the many possible tunes or pictures into which they might enter, of the links that connect individuals viewed and savoured as individuals, and not primarily as instances of types or laws. (CC, 140)

The “gifts that historians need” thus differ markedly from the gifts required for progress in the natural sciences: not a mere facility with “idealised models,” but “something at the opposite end of the scale, namely an eye for what is unique and unrepeated”—an eye for what renders an idea, individual, or culture distinct as opposed to an eye for how it might be assimilated into an ideal framework (SR, 22). Rather than force the discrete elements of experience to fit a model, the best historians create syntheses of meaning by allowing unique and idiosyncratic facts to speak for themselves. Meinecke is a favorite model of this art; it was his achievement “to avoid constricting and distorting formulae, fanatical faith in laws that social change must obey, into which all the facts must be compressed.” His “unbroken sense of reality” consisted in a sensitivity to the individual and particular.

Berlin’s admiration of Meinecke is profound. Indeed he might well have been describing himself when he describes Meinecke’s central questions as “the relation of values (both of historians and of men in general) to objectively established facts and to the conclusions of the natural sciences” and “the apparent incompatibility between the methods of the natural sciences and those

of humane studies, and the implications of this for political and individual morality.” But most telling is his account of the source of Meinecke’s concern with such problems: “These problems arose for him not merely as a historian or as a student of historical method, but as a German and a human being” (POI, 209–10). At the heart of both Berlin’s and Meinecke’s struggles against determinism is the conviction that what it means to be human is revealed only in being and acting with other human beings. Understanding thus begins with sympathy and the moral appreciation of others it affords, and it is for this reason that Berlin numbers among the talents “indispensable to historians, but not (or not to such a degree) to natural scientists,” a “capacity for understanding people’s characters, knowledge of ways in which they are likely to react to one another, ability to ‘enter into’ their motives, their principles, the movement of their thoughts and feelings” (CC, 133). Meinecke thus reinforced Vico in reminding students of history and politics of the necessity of “a capacity for sympathy and imagination beyond any required by a physicist” (CC, 136).

Such, in brief, is Berlin’s critique of and remedy for historical inquiry. But what might such an understanding of history imply for a student of politics? Quite a bit, Berlin thinks: “History is the account of the relations of humans to each other and to their environment; consequently what is true of history is likely to be true of political thought and action as well” (SR, 28). Berlin’s own approach to political inquiry was decisively shaped by his approach to history. Just as he began his study of historical inquiry with a question concerning the utility of scientific history, his study of political inquiry begins with a question concerning the nature of political knowledge:

What is this knowledge? Is it knowledge of a science? Are there really laws to be discovered, rules to be learnt? Can statesmen be taught something called political science—the science of the relationships of human beings to each other and to their environment—which consists, like other sciences, of systems of verified hypotheses, organised under laws, that enable one, by the use of further experiment and observation, to discover other facts, and to verify new hypotheses? (SR, 40)⁷

Berlin clearly answers in the negative: “There is no natural science of politics any more than a natural science of ethics” (SR, 49). But what route did he take to this conclusion, and what alternative does he provide?

Berlin’s engagement with the French Enlightenment laid the foundation for his own “suspicion of intellectuals in politics” (SR, 52). His antipathy to the disastrous political consequences of philosophical rationalism is obvious in the BBC Radio talks reprinted under the unobvious subtitle *Six Enemies of Human Liberty* (FB).

⁷ Berlin’s critique of the language of verification here and elsewhere in his political writings recalls his 1939 essay on the verification principle (CC, 12–31) and again points to his training in philosophy. Certain elements of his political thought also anticipate other philosophical debates; compare the treatment of determinism and agency in “Historical Inevitability” to, e.g., the treatment of determinism and responsibility offered in Strawson 1962.

Here he developed his view of the rationalistic excesses of Holbach, Helvétius, and La Mettrie (among others), the fruit of their insistence on the calculability of human behavior and their belief that politics is in fact capable of being reduced to a science (SR, 41; CC, 153; AC, 1; L, 108–9; TCE, 276–78; FB, 5–10; KM, 31–34, 66). This project came of age with Plekhanov, he further insists, whose careful study of the French materialists inspired the program that earned him the title “the father of Russian Marxism” (Berlin [1956] 2002, 129–30). Yet Berlin’s criticism goes deeper than the familiar notion that the scientific enthusiasm of the eighteenth-century philosophers laid a foundation for modern totalitarianism (POI, 141–42; L, 278). For not only does Berlin fear the consequences of the positive program of the *philosophes*, but also he fears the loss of that which they sought to replace. The *philosophes* taught that “political judgement need never again be a matter of instinct and flair and sudden illuminations and strokes of unanalysable genius; rather it should henceforth be built upon the foundations of indubitable knowledge” that emerge from the “rational study of human nature.” The “mysterious art of government was to be mysterious no longer,” having been reduced to “a matter of professional competence and specialisation.” Thus their hope: that “social engineers” or a “despotism of an élite of scientists” would replace statesmen (SR, 43; FB, 24; cf. POI, 135; SR, 28; L, 85–88).

In his own writings Berlin sought to rescue the possibility of “political genius” from the *philosophes* and their modern utilitarian disciples who “substitute counterfeit science for individual judgement” (SR, 40, 52). To do so he first examines the nature of this genius. Just as he earlier distinguished the historian’s “gift” from the scientist’s, so again does he distinguish the statesman’s “gift” as “wholly incompatible with faith in the supremacy of some idealised model” (POI, 140). His gift too cannot be taught: It “cannot be wholly learnt from books or professors” but, rather, “requires considerable personal experience and natural aptitude” (SR, 41). Like the *phronimos* who knows how to act but cannot articulate the principles by which he does, these “statesmen of genius” have “understanding rather than knowledge—some kind of acquaintance with relevant facts of such a kind that it enables those who have it to tell what fits with what: what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far, without necessarily being able to explain how they know this or even what they know” (SR, 32). Like artists who know their media, political geniuses chart courses of action “which they find it difficult if not impossible to explain in clear theoretical terms” (POI, 139).

In describing the statesman’s gift, Berlin also appropriates the metaphor of sight that characterizes the historian’s gift. Thus in rejecting the notion that the ever-changing data of historical and political reality can “be caught and pinned down and labelled like so many individual butterflies,” Berlin insists that in order to construct patterns true to life, “one needs to see”—one must have a “direct, almost sensuous contact with the relevant data.” It will not be enough merely “to

recognise their general characteristics, to classify them or reason about them, or analyse them, or reach conclusions and formulate theories about them” (SR, 46). Thus like the historian, the statesman must abandon theory and instead return to a more common way of seeing. Berlin has no patience for obscurantism and rejects the notion “that there is some virtue in darkness as such, that the most important things are too deep for words”—there is no defense of any sort of “magic eye” in Berlin’s work (SR, 48, 46). Instead he calls for a return to “empiricism,” though not the empiricism of the scientists, to be sure. Rather than begin with a model, proper empiricism begins by surveying the data and then constructs a view of the whole from a synthesis of the unique and discrete, preferring the atypical to the typical (SR, 45). No mysterious power, this art is merely common sense and common apprehension refined to extraordinary levels, for the “power of integrating or synthesising the fleeting, broken, infinitely various wisps and fragments that make up life at any level” is the common property of “every human being” who must do so “if he is to survive at all” (SR, 47). The statesman’s vision is best understood as a profoundly more acute version of the apprehension or common sense that enables ordinary people to navigate ordinary life, the fullest and most refined type of “that ‘sense of reality’ which largely consists in semi-conscious integration of a large number of apparently trivial or unnoticeable elements in the situation that between them form some kind of pattern which of itself ‘suggests’—‘invites’—the appropriate action” (POI, 139; cf. SR, 51).

At its best the sense of reality is then a sense “of what fits with what, of what cannot exist with what” (RT, 69). In politics, as in the study of history, this manifests itself as an appreciation of the natural limits of human beings. Statesmen, no less than historians, require an intimate and sympathetic understanding of the unique claims of their particular human subjects. In his essay on Einstein and Israel, Berlin insists that “those who deal with human beings and their affairs need some awareness of the essential nature of all human experience and activity, a sense of the limits of what it is possible for men and women to be or to do” (PI, 75). This grasp of human limits ultimately distinguishes the “non-scientific, non-generalising” political understanding of man from the scientific understanding, as it is the duty of “historians or men of action” to paint “a picture of men as free, sometimes strong, and largely ignorant that is the precise contrary of the scientific view of them as weak, determined and potentially omniscient” (SR, 38–39; cf. POI, 141).

Better and safer then to be a skeptic than a determinist. To take the latter route—to believe that all human activity can be graphed or modeled—can lead, at best, only to a dehumanized utilitarianism or, more likely, to the belief that “Lenin, Hitler and Stalin and their minor followers elsewhere” sought to put into practice: “that human beings are a good deal more plastic than was hitherto thought” and that “almost anything, at any rate far more than was hitherto thought possible, can be altered” (SR, 11; cf. POI, 204). Merely to cast off the shackles of inexorability is thus not enough. To

avoid a reign of destruction even more devastating than positivism, the individual who can “cause vast changes to occur” and put into motion plans of “vast extent,” capable of affecting “the fortunes of mankind to a radical degree,” must be tethered by a recognition of what human beings can and cannot be lest he become a tyrant himself (POI, 137–38).⁸ True political greatness is then not only a greatness that liberates rather than enslaves, but one founded on an appreciation of both the promise and the limits of human nature that a sense of reality affords. Put differently, political greatness properly understood depends upon a particular approach to political understanding, one that prioritizes the sense of reality’s comprehensive insights over the specific knowledge attained through specialized inquiry. Berlin paints this greatness in his essays on Churchill and Weizmann. In these portraits he illustrates not only the indispensable role of political greatness in political life, but also the indispensable role of a humanistic or nonscientific approach to political understanding.

POLITICAL ACTION AND POLITICAL INQUIRY

Berlin most clearly defines this greatness in three essays: “Winston Churchill in 1940” ([1949] 2001), “Chaim Weizmann’s Leadership” ([1954c] 2002), and “Chaim Weizmann” ([1958] 2001). Far from mere hagiographic *éloges*, these essays bring to completion Berlin’s critique of the scientific study of politics. The conception of political greatness they offer represents their author’s most concentrated and sustained attempt to recover praise and blame, honor and responsibility, human agency and choice, from determinism’s assaults. In so doing, the essays present a challenge to a certain received understanding of his project. Berlin’s thoughts on value pluralism in liberal society have received careful attention, but lost has been his conviction that the continued endurance of liberal values (including pluralism) requires individuals who possess virtues that exceed those values traditionally promoted by liberal society. Berlin’s first claim in these essays is then that the cultivation of a type of nobility to which positivism is hostile and that pluralism alone can neither create nor sustain is indispensable to democracy’s preservation. But Berlin’s thoughts on greatness are important not merely for what they reveal of his understanding of political action, but also for what they reveal of his understanding of political inquiry. His essays on political genius or greatness also aspire to reform and to rehabilitate political inquiry itself.

Berlin’s unfashionable and unabashed admiration for greatness is clearly meant in the first instance as a

challenge to his colleagues and contemporaries. “Social theorists of various schools,” he explains, “sometimes try to convince us that the concept of greatness is a romantic illusion—a vulgar notion exploited by politicians or propagandists, and one which a deeper study of the facts will always dispel.” This view he calls a “deflationary theory” and claims that it can only be defeated by “coming face to face with an authentic instance of greatness and its works” (PI, 34). Now Berlin was no naïve partisan of great-man theories of history or politics, to be sure, and he is clearly sympathetic to Tolstoy’s assault on the folly of simple souls who think that in Napoleon alone lies the explanation of his world. Yet for all this he never denies—and rather insists upon—the efficacy and necessity of individual political actors. In his own writings Churchill and Weizmann play especially conspicuous epic roles, and his portraits of them are suffused with the spirit of John Stuart Mill’s warning (which he quotes directly) that the “individually small” men of today would do well to remember that “it was men of another stamp than this that made England what it has been; and men of another stamp will be needed to prevent its decline” (L, 239). Reading them we cannot miss the delight Berlin took in celebrating the magnanimity of his subjects and challenging the scientific predilection toward the classificatory and microscopic. Thus his Churchill: “a man larger than life,” a “gigantic historical figure during his own lifetime,” the “largest human being of our time” (PI, 23). So too his Weizmann: a man “of vast historical magnitude,” a giant figure “of more than human size, an immortal hero” who “overshadowed his contemporaries”—indeed “not an inhabitant of the twentieth century” (POI, 194; PI, 61). Together they represent to Berlin the possibility that the war may not have extinguished a certain sort of human excellence.

The bond that unites Churchill to Weizmann runs deep.⁹ Yet Berlin would also have us attend to a crucial distinction between them and the two types of greatness and approaches to political understanding that they represent. Berlin’s renowned division of hedgehogs from foxes has been put to so much use and abuse alike that one hesitates to use it as an explanatory device, yet the construct appropriately illuminates his careful distinction between his two model statesmen. The categories originally referred to two incommensurate approaches to the comprehensive understanding of reality: hedgehogs, distinguished by a monistic understanding defined by a single discoverable principle; and foxes, who deal in multiplicities of data, gifted alike at the study of the discrete and at the science that unites them (RT, 22). But only a year after the initial publication of “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” precisely the same dichotomy reappears in Berlin’s delineation

⁸ For Berlin’s most vivid description of the darker side of this sort of individual greatness, see Berlin 1952 (published under the pseudonym “O. Utis”). The article’s principal claim is that without Stalin the Soviet regime must collapse, but in establishing this claim Berlin paints Stalin as an example of the continued persistence and necessity of individual leadership even in a regime and “an age when the social sciences claim to be able to predict more and more accurately the behavior of groups and individuals, rulers and ruled” (197).

⁹ The romantic love of human potential and self-realization not only drew him to his two great-souled men, but also drew them to each other, Berlin explains. Their “natural bond” was due “to the immense love of life in both . . . they were both on the side of whatever expanded, grew, was likely to stand up, to animate and to quicken vital processes, and against all that tended towards contraction, stillness, everything which sprang from caution, hugged the shore, wished to conserve and not transform” (POI, 192).

of “two types of political greatness, incompatible with, and indeed sometimes opposed to, each other.” On the one side stand those dedicated to “the simplicity and nobility of the central principle to which they dedicate all that they have,” who “impose some pattern so clear, so uncomplicated, upon the manifold diversity of life” and devote themselves to the realization of one “unadorned central doctrine.” Such we might call political hedgehogs. But another type of greatness also exists, that of political foxes. These too are distinguished by their approach to political understanding: “So far from ignoring the infinite complexity of the life which surrounds them, they have an unanalysable capacity for integrating the tiny fragments of which it is composed into some coherent, intelligible pattern.” They have “antennae” that are “extremely sensitive and record half-consciously a vast variety of experience; but instead of being overwhelmed by so much, their genius consists precisely in the fact that they are able to integrate it—not by any conscious process, but in some semi-instinctive fashion—into a single coherent picture” (POI, 186–88; cf. PI, 28–29).

Berlin greatly admires the political hedgehog, yet his admiration hardly prevents him from actively doubting whether his is in fact the sort of greatness that ought to be encouraged in a world still recovering from two great wars. Thus he repeatedly recalls us to a troubling side of the political hedgehog: He is “sometimes fanatical” and “somewhat inhuman” and even sometimes exhibits a “somewhat inhuman fanaticism” (POI, 186–88; cf. RT, 22). Elsewhere Berlin speaks of his “single principle and fanatical vision” and his “blindness and stubborn self-absorption” (PI, 28). But Berlin most pointedly criticizes this sort of political greatness for its incompatibility with the values and ideals of the age in which he himself lives. This greatness, he insists, belongs to another world; at its best it rises to “the noble grandeur of the great and simple heroes of classical antiquity.” How different, and how much more appropriate to the age of democratic egalitarianism, is the greatness of the political fox, he suggests—the greatness of those “who possess the gifts of ordinary men, but these in an almost supernatural degree,” who “do not merely stand for but understand the aspirations of many humble persons,” and who elicit from others “a delight in their accessibility, their democratic quality, their human failings” (POI, 186–88). Berlin’s twofold division of excellence is then at once a referendum on the sort of political greatness appropriate for democratic as opposed to aristocratic ages as well as a referendum on the merits of two different approaches to political understanding. Insofar as his portraits of Churchill and Weizmann represent these two types of greatness, we find in them both his understanding of modern magnanimity and his defense of the approach to political knowledge likeliest to lead to genuine political understanding.¹⁰

¹⁰ Roosevelt is another worthy candidate for the title of Berlin’s quintessential political fox. Certainly his accounts of Roosevelt’s political genius bear important resemblances to the qualities he emphasizes in his studies of Weizmann (see especially PI, 11–12, 21, 28–29, and also the comparison of Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy

Churchill, Berlin’s quintessential political hedgehog, represents both a final incarnation of classical political virtue and a potentially dangerous approach to political wisdom. More than once Berlin calls attention to Churchill’s “Periclean reign,” “his glorious Periclean rule,” and his role as “a mythical hero who belongs to legend as much as to reality” (PI, 16; ZPWW, 53; PI, 23). But what principally distinguished Churchill was his absolute commitment to that same all-encompassing and singular vision that distinguishes the political hedgehog, his “stubborn faith and a single-minded, unchanging view of the public and private good” (PI, 7). Able to conceptualize and articulate a vision far nobler than that of any other man of his age, Churchill painted that vision “in primary colours, with no half-tones”; the monist’s love of elegant simplicity animates his “heroic, highly coloured, sometimes over-simple and even naïve, but always genuine, vision of life” (PI, 3, 5). But Berlin finds this vision particularly fascinating because it was alive, active, and creative rather than antiquarian and reconstructive. Prescriptive rather than descriptive, this sense of historical reality transformed political reality, and this “magical power to transform” to which our attention is repeatedly called is meant to appear at once enrapturing and terrifying (PI, 9, 14, 16). He profoundly admires Churchill’s capacity to ennoble Britons through words that “idealised them with such intensity that in the end they approached his ideal and began to see themselves as he saw them” (PI, 14). He is awed by Churchill’s ability to lift Britons “to an abnormal height in a moment of crisis,” the product of an imagination that in envisioning what men might become refused to be limited by what they are (PI, 16). But such disregard of what men can and cannot be Berlin finds both admirable and unsettling. Thus “Churchill’s strength” is precisely “what is most frightening in him”: that he was utterly devoid of “numberless sensitive antennae” that bring home the oscillations of the external world. Churchill “does not reflect a contemporary social or moral world”; instead “he creates one with such power and coherence that it becomes a reality and alters the external world by being imposed upon it with irresistible force” (PI, 12–13; cf. L, 196–97). In other words: The political hedgehog lacks the virtue of the political fox.

“Churchill is preoccupied by his own vivid world, and it is doubtful how far he has ever been aware of what actually goes on in the heads and hearts of others” (PI, 13). On this point Berlin distinguishes Weizmann’s magnanimity and his approach to political understanding from Churchill’s. Churchill succeeded precisely because he refused to be persuaded by—indeed he refused even to attend to—human weakness or limitations. In contrast, Weizmann’s sympathy with the suffering, his keen attentiveness to the human elements

that Berlin offered in his 1965 interview with Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as published in the *New York Review of Books*, 22 October 1998). Yet the Weizmann essays are infused with an emotional investment in their subject wanting in Berlin’s treatment of Roosevelt, perhaps because the two (on Berlin’s own admission) never met (PI, 25). In the same vein, Berlin’s Herzl sometimes appears to rival Churchill as the consummate political hedgehog (see POI, 189).

of his political world, was his preeminent feature. His sense of reality too was shaped by his appreciation of history; just as Churchill's image of the ancient constitution was the principal source of his vision of what Britons might become, Weizmann's grasp of the historical experience of Jewish exile was the source of his vision of what Israel might become (PI, 43, 45; WE, 17). Yet Churchill's historical sense was born of an affair with its heroes and not its downtrodden—with Marlborough, not the masses. But it was this that distinguished Weizmann, the one Jews recognized as “flesh of their flesh, a man of the people” (PI, 47; POI, 190; Cocks 1999). Weizmann, we learn,

stood near the centre of the consciousness of his people, and not on its periphery; his ideas and his feelings were, as it were, naturally attuned to the often unspoken, but always central, hopes, fears, modes of feeling of the vast majority of the Jewish masses, with which he felt himself, all his life, in deep and complete natural sympathy. His genius largely consisted in making articulate, and finding avenues for the realisation of, these aspirations and longings; and he did this without exaggerating them in any direction, or forcing them into a preconceived social or political scheme, or driving them towards some privately conceived goal of his own, but always along the grain. (PI, 46; cf. PI, 29; POI, 188)

It was Churchill's genius to deny the limits imposed on man by both nature and history, but it was Weizmann's to place these at the center of his project. Weizmann's understanding of history is thus not merely a rejection of the determinists' fanatical faith in “historical ‘laws’ or formulae” in favor of a “sense of the correlation of real historical forces,” but also counters monists like Procrustes who would impose fixed patterns onto society (POI, 192; L, 216). His sense of reality afforded him precisely what Churchill's approach to political understanding did not, namely, awareness of “the strengths and weaknesses, the purposes and characters of the human beings and institutions with which he was concerned” (POI, 192). Both intellectual and political hedgehogs are susceptible to fanaticism, but Weizmann, “above all things an empiricist,” possessed a historical imagination that led him to deny utopia and, instead, afforded him an “almost infallible sense of what cannot be true, of what cannot be done” (PI, 45; cf. 57). “On good terms with reality,” he was free “from fanaticism and intolerant, utopian idealism,” even amidst “intense vision and singleness of purpose” (WE, 18–20). Churchill was animated by an imagination that favored “ideal models in terms of which the facts are ordered in the mind” and imposed this model onto reality so as to render its multiplicities more uniform. But Weizmann's sense of reality and antennae constructed a vision of reality more true to life from a comprehensive synthesis of its diverse elements and suggested political arrangements “that embody decent respect for the opinions of mankind” (PI, 9; WE, 21).

Berlin's distinction of Churchill from Weizmann, the political hedgehog from the political fox, returns us to our original question regarding the nature of political inquiry. That modern political stability depends on the cultivation of a particular type of democratic

political leader is only the first of the lessons that he means to teach in his essays on statesmanship. Among his other aims is that of restoring to political inquiry an appreciation of the ways in which individual actors shape political life. For not only does Berlin argue that great political actors are indispensable to politics, but also he insists that an appreciation for “the efficacy of individual initiative” is indispensable to any political science that aspires to a comprehensive understanding of political life (SR, 12). Just as no inquiry in the natural sciences would be considered complete if its methods could not account for the most powerful forces that shape its subject, so does Berlin suggest that no political inquiry is complete if it fails to account for “the influence on public events of individual character and individual behaviour” (ZPWW, 8). Greatness itself he measures as a capacity to shape political life to an extreme degree: “To call someone a great man is to claim that he has intentionally taken (or perhaps could have taken) a large step, one far beyond the normal capacities of men, in satisfying, or materially affecting, central human interests” (PI, 34; L, 97n1). His own motive for writing on Churchill is to remind us of this greatness: “I thought, and still think, that his part in 1940 in saving England (and, indeed, the vast majority of mankind) from Hitler had been insufficiently remembered and that the balance needed to be restored” (PI, ix; CC, 138). So too he reminds us that “[w]ithout Weizmann's policies during the war the State of Israel could scarcely have come into existence” (ZPWW, 57). In ascribing the rescue of Britain and the birth of Israel to the efforts of individual actors, Berlin suggests that study of them is required of any inquirer who aspires to understand the whole of the events they shaped. Berlin's claim is thus that it is no less essential for political inquirers than for political actors to recover a sense of what individual human beings can and cannot do. His own attempt to restore to political inquiry an appreciation for human agency represents one way he points to the place of “humanism” in a comprehensive political science.

But Berlin would not have political science merely recover an appreciation for the actions of Weizmann or Churchill. In describing their approaches to political knowledge he also calls political inquirers to recover a certain side of their approach. His sharpest critique of the scientific approach to political inquiry concerns its specialization. Specialists seeking knowledge of their world are inevitably limited by both their interests and their methods to acquiring precise knowledge of specific elements, Berlin thinks. Moreover, these elements present themselves as objects of study not because we are impressed by their political import, but because of a “specific interest” we have in these areas owing to “our practical needs or theoretical interests” (SR, 14). Again, Berlin grants that such focus can bring spectacular results in particular fields of inquiry: “There are vast regions of reality which only scientific methods” illuminate, and there “what science can achieve must be welcomed” (SR, 48). Yet he doubts that politics should be counted among these fields, as the methods of the specialist he judges to be incompatible with the peculiar character of the subjects of political inquiry. Even if

the individual could be sufficiently isolated so as to be treated in the manner that specialization requires, he claims that as soon as we see “how many notions, ethical, political, social, personal, go to the making of the outlook of a single person,” we “begin to realise how very small a part of the total our sciences”—and the humane sciences included—“are able to take in” (SR, 15). Similarly, just as the complexity of the individual renders it impossible to isolate the elements of which he is comprised, so too does Berlin claim that the very complexity and nature of political life itself renders its component phenomena similarly resistant to isolation. To claim otherwise, he insists, would be to do violence to the distinguishing characteristic of political life, namely, the “complicated network of relationships involving every form of human intercourse” that grows “more and more insusceptible to tidy classification, more and more opaque to the theorist’s vision as he attempts to unravel their texture” (SR, 30). Herein lies the danger of those who “take their knowledge of a small portion of the scene to cover the entire scene,” believing that “methods or models which work well in particular fields will apply to the entire sphere of human action” (SR, 37, 49). In political inquiry, as in political action, an appreciation of reality’s complex multiplicity affords a more accurate and more comprehensive grasp of the whole of political life than either a specialized inquiry that focuses only on its specific parts or a systematic inquiry that, in aspiring to uncover “patterns,” overlooks the distinct elements that make a political world unique. This is the core of Berlin’s critique of all reductive approaches to political understanding, whether of monists or determinists or hedgehogs or eighteenth-century rationalists: “The truth they ignored was the existence of too great a gap between the generalisation and the concrete situation—the simplicity of the former, the excessive complexity of the latter” (SR, 34).

Berlin’s ultimate claim then is that the “excessive complexity” of political reality cannot be penetrated by a political inquiry itself excessively complex in its methods and language. His rhetoric begins to outrun him when he insists that a statesman “faced with an agonising choice of possible courses of action” is unlikely to “employ a team of specialists in political science”; such rhetoric obscures a more subtle point. Specialists are gifted at generalizing and comparing, but in politics “what matters is to understand a particular situation in its full uniqueness” (SR, 44–45). Full appreciation of this uniqueness or distinctness in turn cannot be garnered through fact-gathering, but only by “a form of understanding and not of knowledge of facts in the ordinary sense” (SR, 23; cf. CC, 125). Ultimately Berlin thinks that this “form of understanding” is missed by those “objective” inquirers who “regard facts and only facts as interesting and, worse still, all facts as equally interesting” (PI, 17). In contrast to their approach, Berlin seeks to recover “those ways of assessing and analysing facts which are intrinsic to our normal daily experience as human beings in relation to each other,” by aspiring to grasp “the whole intellectual, imaginative, moral, aesthetic, religious life of men” in ways that admittedly “may not pass the scrutiny of a purely fact-establishing

inquiry” (SR, 27). Understanding politics requires attending not merely to concrete facts or to hidden patterns, he insists, but to seemingly more prosaic phenomena: “the half noticed, half inferred, half gazed-at, half unconsciously absorbed minutiae of behaviour and thought and feeling which are at once too numerous, too complex, too fine and too indiscriminable from each other to be identified, named, ordered, recorded, set forth in neutral scientific language” (SR, 23; cf. 15).

Berlin’s aim in making such a claim is to encourage political inquirers to recover precisely that apprehension of reality’s “thick texture” that distinguished the historical inquiry of Vico and Meinecke and the political judgment of Weizmann. Their ambition to understand society from within led not to relativism but to an attempt to grasp human reality as a whole, and their genius lay in their “capacity for taking in the total pattern of a human situation, of the way in which things hang together” (SR, 50). This attention to the “total pattern of a human situation” points to the most important sort of “humanism” that Berlin means to restore to political inquiry. As we saw above, he insists that the sense of reality that makes historical and political understanding possible is founded on an appreciation of the concepts and categories of “commonsense knowledge” (CC, 115). Yet scientific inquiry, insofar as it is “free from control by common sense,” is unable to afford such an appreciation (CC, 141). What is required of political inquiry is a return to the claims of ordinary life in order to guarantee that such inquiry will remain animated by a focus on the most important elements of human life. Political understanding, Berlin claims, requires not simply sophistication in methods of revealing either facts or patterns, but appreciation of the “most pervasive, least observed categories, those which lie closest to us and which for that very reason escape description” (SR, 16).

CONCLUSION

Half a century ago Berlin declared that the “quarrel between these rival types of knowledge—that which results from methodical inquiry, and the more impalpable kind that consists in the ‘sense of reality,’ in ‘wisdom’—is very old” (RT, 78; cf. AC, 80; POI, 220; L, 141; CTH, 1–2). Here I have sought to demonstrate that Berlin himself was an active participant in a particular instantiation of this quarrel that erupted among political scientists in the 1950s. His contribution to this quarrel, moreover, intersects with aspects of other contemporary positions. Leo Strauss (1961) criticized Berlin for his relativism, yet from the presentation above it would seem that Berlin anticipates Strauss’s own critique of the reduction of politics to “social engineering,” his warning against attempting to understand politics “from without, in the perspective of the neutral observer,” his claim that political understanding begins with “prescientific awareness,” his caution against organizing political inquiry around a search for “patterns,” and his critique of scientific political inquiry for its “break with common sense” (Strauss [1962] 1995, 206, 211, 212, 219; cf. Behnegar 2003, 141–206,

and Pippin 2003). Even stronger is Berlin's connection to Michael Oakeshott, with whom he also shares a critique of the "assimilation of politics to engineering," a distinction of "technical knowledge" from "practical knowledge," a dismissal of the *philosophe* to whom "all knowledge appears equally significant," a rejection of scientific history and its quest for "general laws," a distaste for the modern intellectual world's "addiction to 'practice,'" an appreciation of the danger of academic "specialization" for political inquiry, an insistence that the language of politics is "the language of every-day, practical life" including talk of "praise and blame," and a belief that what "the statesman requires" are "the ordinary 'faculties' and ordinary knowledge that everyone (even the convinced rationalist) uses every day in the conduct of his life" (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, 9, 12, 138, 153, 181, 190, 206; 1993, 107). Paul Franco has recently noted certain of these similarities in the course of comparing Oakeshott's critique of rationalism to Berlin's. Franco's comparison also prompts him to wonder whether Berlin's critique "remains bound up with the ideological wars of the fifties, attacking an enemy that is now no longer recognizable." Thus he asks a crucial question: Is Berlin's target in fact "something of a straw man at the beginning of the twenty-first century?" (Franco 2003, 490) This question deserves an answer. What relevance indeed does Berlin's critique of rationalism have for political inquiry today?

Berlin's critique of scientific political inquiry, I have sought to show, focuses on two goals: first, recovering within political inquiry an appreciation for the greatness or nobility of individual political actors and, second, restoring to political inquiry an appreciation for aspects of political life better apprehended by the sense of reality than by scientific methods. That the first goal originated as a response to the political conditions of the 1950s is beyond doubt. Berlin's essays on Churchill and Weizmann clearly seek to resuscitate an appreciation for excellence in the face of the profound pessimism of the postwar age, which, it was then suggested, was "deeper than it has been perhaps since St. Augustine wrote *De Civitate Dei*" (Cobban 1953, 328). In the face of this pessimism, Berlin's essays called attention to political agency and to the endurance of the possibility of genuine human excellence. In so doing they aim to restore an appreciation for nobility in a world characterized by despondency and obsessed with utility (L, 81). The year that witnessed his essay on Churchill Berlin (1950a) himself described as indifferent to the fact that "large beings once walked the earth" (xxiii). His own writings on greatness sought to counter this indifference and the associated danger "that the commonplace or the counterfeit may be over-praised by those who, in their terror of missing a masterpiece for lack of sensibility or perception see a swan in every goose" (Berlin 1951a, xxix). To train the eyes of political inquirers to distinguish excellence from mediocrity is the aim of the Weizmann essay in particular. Berlin regarded Israel's founding as "a living witness to the triumph of human idealism and will-power over the allegedly inexorable laws of historical evolution." So too did he regard its first president as a model of the "aes-

thetic splendor" that, in defying "the forces of nature and history," is "what ultimately refutes utilitarianism" (POI, 161; L, 338; cf. ZPWW, 67).

Yet the question remains: Is this project still relevant today? Those yet concerned to ennoble the character of modern liberalism might reply that Berlin offers an alternative to contemporary liberalism's dominant emphasis on institutions and procedures. Berlin's liberal synthesis accommodates both negative liberty and moral nobility and suggests that to admire men who "did not belong to their century" is hardly "antiliberal" (Arendt [1968] 1995, 101). Rather than call his liberal credentials into question, Berlin's attachment to nobility instead suggests an alternative provenance for his liberalism—and herein lies its interest today. Berlin's critique of liberalism's Enlightenment heritage prompted him to study the nineteenth-century Romantic and Counter-Enlightenment traditions—a study that led him to Mill, Constant, Herzen, and Tocqueville, each of whom also sought to harmonize a democratic commitment to pluralism with an aristocratic taste for greatness. Indeed with Tocqueville, Berlin agrees that it is necessary for all those interested in the future of democratic societies to "make continuous efforts to spread within these societies a taste for the infinite, a sentiment of greatness." Yet also like Tocqueville he insists that those living today "ought not to strain to make ourselves like our fathers, but strive to attain the kind of greatness and happiness that is proper to us" (Tocqueville 2000, 519, 675).¹¹ Tocqueville and Berlin were each sincere liberals, and rather than quarrel with the egalitarianism that replaced an older understanding of nobility, they admire not the nobility that challenges democracy but the nobility necessary for democracy. Berlin's portrait of Weizmann is his own attempt to define the greatness proper to us. Churchill embodies a great but past age and was "perhaps the last of his kind," but Weizmann, champion of "civilized values," recognized the dignity of common life, which in the democratic age may be the noblest substitute for the lost promise of classical magnanimity (PI, 22; WE, 18–21).

The second aim of Berlin's critique of scientific political inquiry, the recovery of the sense of reality, was also deeply indebted to his study of the Romantic Age and the Counter-Enlightenment, and particularly to their attempt to defend commonsense wisdom from the assaults of Enlightenment rationality. Such an endeavor nicely captures Berlin's characteristic approach to the study of the history of ideas. Berlin's scholarship is deeply informed by his understanding of the central political problems of his own age, most importantly by the struggle of democracy against communism, which he took to be the apotheosis of both positive liberty and monistic rationalism. His attempt to bring the history

¹¹ Berlin's debts to Mill, Constant, and Herzen have often been noted, but his similarities to Tocqueville also deserve recognition. Many of the ideas that he celebrates in Herzen and Mill and incorporates in his own synthesis—the nobility of free choice, the rejection of scientific determinism and embrace of self-determinism, the preference for greatness over mediocrity, and the importance of individual responsibility—he also found in Tocqueville (see Berlin 1965).

of ideas to bear on contemporary political problems points to a second reason why Berlin's critique of scientific scholarly methods remains worthy of attention today. In both his day and ours, Berlin's own chosen field, the history of ideas, has been criticized for elevating concern for method over concern for what is politically important, and historians of political thought have been compelled to defend their field against the charge that it is more historical than political (see, e.g., Skinner 2002a, 5–7). But whatever other charges may be levied against Berlin's approach to the history of ideas, this is not one of them. The boldness of the brushstrokes with which he painted his portraits of past thinkers leaves them conspicuously open to critique on the grounds of their accuracy and subtlety. Yet his approach was guided by the conviction that it is the responsibility of an intellectual historian to exercise careful judgment in choosing his material, and that it is necessary when examining the thoughts of the past to focus on those ideas which remain politically important. Thus more necessary than method for historians of ideas is what comes before method, namely, the judgment that enables us to determine which ideas are worth our attention and efforts and which are—to use a favorite locution of Berlin's—"justly forgotten." Otherwise we run the danger of ending up like Tolstoy, equally appalled by scientific history and by what seems the consequence of its rejection: "the apparently arbitrary selection of material, and the no less arbitrary distribution of emphasis, to which all historical writing seemed to be doomed" (RT, 32).

As a historian of ideas Berlin's methods were governed by a focus on recovering those ideas that remain of genuine political importance. This same focus is at the heart of his critique of the methods of scientific political inquiry. Like many political scientists today, Berlin was troubled by the propensity of contemporary academic specialization to mistake increases in methodological precision for increases in genuine understanding. It is for this reason that he calls attention to the sense of reality. His hope is that the sense of reality will promote the recovery of the commonsense perspective of ordinary life and ordinary language and, thereby, narrow the gap that separates specialized inquirers from political reality. By so doing he reminds us that the debate over the scientific approach to political inquiry should not be limited to a debate over the relative merits of philosophical and empirical approaches. Berlin would have agreed that political science in both its quantitative and its qualitative forms "may have more to offer by asking the right questions than by getting the right answers" (Jervis 2002, 189). To theorists and empiricists alike he reminds us that political inquiry, no less than political action, depends for its success not simply on the methods that enable us to solve problems, but also on the judgment that enables us to appreciate which questions remain most worth asking.

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