

Understanding Isaiah Berlin

The Beginning of Wisdom

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Isaiah Berlin and the Defense of the Human World

Freedom, Tragedy, and the Moral Foundations of Pluralism (Berlin Studies Book 1)

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I remember a competition from my early days as a publisher, in the mid 1970s. A prize was offered within my firm for the most unlikely or absurd invented book title that nevertheless satisfied the condition that it might plausibly be encountered at the Frankfurt Book Fair, where rights to forthcoming books are marketed each year to publishers and agents. An internal referee's decision was final. The winner that year was *The World Atlas of Herons*.

If I had been asked in the autumn of 2025 to predict the most unlikely next development in the ever proliferating study of Isaiah Berlin's thought, it would never have occurred to me that an Indonesian Muslim would shortly publish eight linked volumes in good English on Berlin's ideas.

Yet this is exactly what happened. Kamaruzzaman Bustamam Ahmad (henceforth KBA), Professor of the Anthropology of Religion at the State Islamic University of Indonesia in Banda Aceh, more or less simultaneously issued the eight volumes of his series 'Berlin Studies' on Amazon in December 2025. (This is a self-publishing venture, with the virtues and vices of the genre.)



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So far, so surprising. But what I found most unexpected, to my shame, is that KBA really *understands* Berlin, as well as, if not better than, any other writer known to me, sometimes including Berlin himself. He gets to the heart of much of Berlin's thought with an often mesmerising concision and lucidity of expression. No sooner did I start reading this first book than I realised that KBA has entered Berlin's mind, and has been apparently effortlessly revealing its contents. This by itself would justify the greatest admiration.

Here and there, like currants in a bun, there are individual sentences that stand out, asking to become Berlinian mottoes. Which could catch on? 'Berlin offers no system or program; he offers a stance.' 'There is no single answer to the question of how to live' (so much for the major world religions, a point KBA strangely neglects to make). 'Values are embedded in forms of life and cannot be translated without distortion' (so much for the view that values are logically prior to cultures). 'Freedom requires the

rejection of monism and the acceptance of plurality.’ ‘No idea can justify human suffering. The future cannot redeem the present. Salvation begins with the refusal of abstractions that demand blood.’ ‘The desire to save the world could lead to its destruction.’ ‘Ideas have the power to inspire liberation and the power to justify brutality.’ ‘The highest task of thought is to protect plurality against the tyranny of unity.’ ‘Freedom requires the acceptance of conflict and the rejection of certainty.’ ‘The capacity to understand the world from another’s perspective is essential to tolerance.’ ‘Monism offers the comfort of certainty, the promise of harmony, and the illusion of control. Pluralism, by contrast, demands courage – the courage to live without guarantees, to make decisions without certainty, and to accept responsibility for consequences that cannot be undone.’ ‘Religious thinkers claimed that divine truth guarantees unity.’ ‘Moral life is a journey marked by wounds that cannot be healed.’ ‘The task of political life is not to build paradise but to avoid hell.’ ‘Human greatness lies not in eliminating conflict but in confronting it with courage, humility, and compassion.’ ‘If there is one right way to live, those who resist must be coerced, re-educated, or eliminated.’ ‘Respect does not eliminate disagreement; it ennobles it. It turns conflict into dialogue rather than destruction’ (I am reminded of my own long-ago suggestion that pluralism turns a missionary into an explorer). ‘Without pluralism, democracy becomes a mask for domination.’ ‘Humility protects humanity from itself.’ ‘The preservation of humanity demands the acceptance of mystery’ (a particularly vatic remark). ‘The pursuit of purity becomes the justification for violence.’ ‘Wisdom begins where certainty collapses.’ ‘When individuals disappear into categories, murder becomes administration.’ ‘To think is to recognise the consequences of thinking.’ ‘Compassion is the first moral act.’

There are various problems to set against admiration. First, restricted coverage. Berlin’s value pluralism is centre stage, as the subtitle suggests. This is as it should be, but the plurality of Berlin’s subject matter is largely invisible. Berlin writes about an

astonishingly wide variety of topics: a multitude of individual thinkers and other remarkable persons (historical and contemporary), philosophy, politics, the history of ideas, music and much more. By neglecting most of the rich undergrowth from which the tall tree of Berlin's pluralism rises to dominate the landscape of his thought, KBA simplifies the mind that fructifies the tree, making it appear dangerously single-eyed. But, like Turgenev, Berlin cannot simplify himself; nor should we. Reading KBA is far from a substitute for reading Berlin himself. It is not that KBA is unaware of what he leaves out here. He has been studying Berlin for a decade, and has published a series of articles which go into the specific details of his work. His first article, 'Understanding the Intellectual History of Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997)', in the October issue of the Indonesian Islamic theology journal *Esensia*, is a wide-ranging survey of Berlin's work and the sources of his ideas. Subsequent articles go into his encounters with Giambattista Vico, Johann Georg Hamann, Karl Marx and the Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But the book under review is a bird of a very different colour, in which the author abstracts, extrapolates and generalises in the service of the master idea he wishes to convey, convey and convey again. He stands so far back from the scene he has chosen to represent that most of the fine detail it contains is lost. For this reader this is a regrettable choice.

The nature and implications of Berlin's pluralism are thoroughly explored and re-explored. Pluralism is defined on the first page of the Introduction: 'Berlin's central insight [is] that human values are multiple, often conflicting, and sometimes tragically incommensurable' (the 'often' and the 'sometimes' are unfortunately dropped later on). KBA over-emphasises tragedy, making it a central and dominant theme in a way that Berlin doesn't. (To a lesser extent, the same applies to cruelty.) He fails to discuss (or even mention) most of the thinkers that are of central importance to Berlin, while returning repeatedly to those he does mention (he has three goes at J. G. Hamann). Most of the book is presented at a level of abstraction very distant from Berlin's highly

personalised essays. These may be minor matters in comparison with his tour de force of empathy, but if he loses the attention of his readers in the process, he also loses the battle.

There are further problems too. The most serious is a fantastical degree of repetition, both within and between volumes. Without reading every word of all eight volumes, I estimate with some confidence that they could profitably be reduced to a single volume without significant loss of coverage. The cross-volume repetition is reflected in the titles of the individual volumes. Freedom, Tragedy, Tyranny, Certainty and the Human World each appear twice; Pluralism and the epithet Moral three times each, in the latter case admittedly attached to different nouns. *The Tyranny of Certainty* (Book 2) rubs shoulders with *The Tragedy of Certainty* (Book 3).

Within volumes also there is massive overlap. To take the volume under review as an example, the 68-page Introduction is essentially a long and internally repetitive summary of the remainder of the volume, and more broadly of the whole series. Berlin's ideas can indeed be profitably examined at widely differing lengths, but again and again we find the same points being made in much the same characterless language. The prose is clear and mostly formally correct (with occasional lapses), but it is also somewhat drab and abstract, flat and humourless, and reads rather as if it has been fed into some AI grammar software, or, worse, into AI authorial software. Should AI have been credited as co-author? There is no fizz, no variety, no colour, no excitement, no stylistic idiosyncrasy – no sign of a real authorial presence. This may partly be a by-product of the fact that the author is not writing in his native language, but it is still a pity: no one could describe Berlin's own prose in these terms, and this sets a standard for his interpreters to aspire to. To make his ideas sound boring is a triumphant *trahison du clerc*.

In the Introduction one particular repetition is striking. Initially we read that 'Tolstoy sought a single key to history, believing that there must exist an underlying order capable of reconciling chaos and making life intelligible.' A few pages later we experience déjà

lu: 'Tolstoy sought an all-encompassing theory that would explain history and reconcile its contradictions.' Later still this happens again: 'Tolstoy believed that human life must possess an underlying meaning that could reconcile its contradictions and provide coherence to the chaos of history.' Similar thoughts appear later in the book. A degree of redundancy is certainly desirable when introducing demanding ideas; but here the redundancy is more that of an early draft needing considerable abbreviation and revision. Remarkably, too, there is no mention of hedgehogs and foxes: how could anybody discuss Berlin's take on Tolstoy, at some length, more than once, without mentioning these iconic vivifying characters?

There is something strangely automatic about the style: the same vocabulary and phrasing recur endlessly through the volume: 'tragedy', for instance, more than two hundred times, and 'limits' almost as many (limits of what, and as opposed to what?). Phrases become dead clichés during the course of the book through over-use. Surprise at KBA's perceptiveness and delight at his perceptions turn into monotony as one encounters the same or similar points far too often, as if one had fallen into a vat of honey. One longs for something savoury. Berlin himself brings thinkers to life through generous quotation, but KBA offers hardly any quotation, and doesn't provide references when he does. He also supplies a relentless barrage of assertion with very little supporting argument.

Phrases are devalued by being used in incompatible company. The rejection of monism, the recognition of limits, recognising tragedy, the recognition that no single system can resolve all conflicts, and humility before difference are all said in different places to be 'the beginning of wisdom'. Furthermore, 'wisdom begins' with the refusal of final answers, where certainty ends (or collapses), or with listening. What is the foundation of freedom? The Counter-Enlightenment defense of contingency; difference; the refusal of perfection; the rejection of determinism; humility. All are proffered in this role by KBA. Which is it? All of the above,

maybe, if we regard them as different aspects of the same deep stance: if so, this needs to be argued for and made explicit.

Large tracts of the volume consist of a tsunami of Wildean paradoxes. The same insights are repeated in slightly different words, or indeed in the same words. It feels as if the author has a box of Lego components (Berlego?) which are put together in various orders, criss-crossing similar terrain with soporific stylistic sameness. Here are some sample paragraphs, chosen almost at random:

The conflict among values is not superficial or contingent. It is structural and permanent. Values collide because they reflect different aspects of human nature and respond to different needs and aspirations. Freedom and equality both represent legitimate human goods, yet the pursuit of one often undermines the other. A society that maximises freedom may generate inequality; a society that maximises equality must restrict freedom. These conflicts cannot be eliminated through rational calculation or comprehensive design. Compromise may ease tension but cannot resolve it. The tension is intrinsic to the values themselves.

The pursuit of certainty transformed knowledge into power. When reason claims privileged access to truth, those who speak in its name claim privileged authority. Experts and theorists replaced kings and priests. The authority of science became indistinguishable from the authority of governance. Rational administration promised neutrality, yet neutrality concealed power. Decisions were framed as objective necessities rather than contested choices. Coercion was justified as implementation of rational truth rather than exercise of will. The rhetoric of science masked the reality of domination.

Rationalism tends to ignore the emotional and relational dimensions of experience that resist calculation. Love, loyalty, grief, faith, and belonging cannot be reduced to rational formulas, yet they are among the most significant elements of human existence. When rationalism discounts the non-quantifiable, it impoverishes human life. It transforms persons into abstractions and erases the uniqueness that makes individuality sacred. Emotional life becomes inefficiency; devotion becomes irrationality;

identity becomes pathology. Rationalism promises empowerment but produces alienation.

The devastation wrought by ideological certainty revealed that the simplification of life is more dangerous than its complexity. Complexity restrains power because it demands humility. Simplicity empowers domination because it removes obstacles to action. The intelligentsia replaced the richness of experience with the clarity of doctrine. They chose simplicity over truth, purity over humanity, certainty over wisdom. The tragedy of ideas is the tragedy of reduction. When the many become the one, violence becomes inevitable.

The bibliography is bizarrely inaccurate, garbled, confused, either an early draft or a second-hand failure of understanding. There is no index: had the author made one, a lot of the repetition might have been highlighted and (one hopes) removed. In short, KBA's impressive but exhausting text contains the seeds of an important work. It needs the discipline of editorial input, in various ways and with varying degrees of urgency. But as a lifelong editor, I *would* say that, wouldn't I?

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